

Chapter 1 - The Uneventful Term

Harry walked aimlessly along the corridor of Hogwarts, totally unconcerned of the stares and constant whispers of the students around him. After six years of studying in this school, it had become a necessity for him to get accustomed to the massive attention he was receiving, may it be positive or negative...but always unwanted. He learned to be tolerant enough to continue existing without blowing up anything or anyone. In fact, it had been some time since his last outburst and it was just due to the Headmistress' refusal to give the Quidditch captainship to someone else other than himself. Their argument had been terrible but Harry won in the end -- Ron became the new Quidditch Captain.

After that, his famous temper had been noticeably absent. Even Snape's endless snide comments did not have its usual sting. It was as if he turned into a human machine who went through all the motions but his heart was definitely not in it. It was a miracle that he still won the championship for the house team despite his lack of enthusiasm but he did not stay long enough for the celebration. He went straight to Luna's ward to check if there was any remarkable improvement in her condition at all -- there was none aside from the fact that she can recognize direct commands now. He was utterly disappointed at that but he supposed he should be thankful for small favors...

His Aunt Petunia divorced the infuriating Vernon, whose memory of the wizarding world had been obliterated, and changed their surnames back to Evans. Now, she and Dudley resumed their life at Crigod's Commune where they truly belonged. His aunt had gotten a job at Three Broomsticks and Dudley was being taught by their friendly neighbors enough magic to pass the acceleration exam set by the Department of Magical Education and be able to begin his fifth year at Hogwarts on the next term. Harry owed them regularly and was pleased to know that they were adjusting to their new life well. Dudley found it difficult at first but being surrounded with decent people all the time, he soon realized his past mistakes and resolved to change his bad attitudes to be worthy of the Evans' name.

Passing by the groups of students happily chatting with one another, Harry sadly recalled the days when he had been young and unaffected. He was so contented and pleased with his life then, with nothing to worry about other than his potions lessons, Quidditch matches and annoying encounters with the Slytherins. But he knew that Snape was wary of him now despite his obvious display of antagonism towards him. Even Quidditch had been unsatisfyingly easy and his enemies at Slytherin were captured during his last confrontation with Voldemort. Minister Arthur Weasley may be wise in giving them a second chance since they were young and did not possess the dark mark yet --- He gave them permission to continue their lessons in Azkaban -- but it sure made life at Hogwarts really dull to say the least.

And there were still lots of questions plaguing his mind...Was it really Voldemort he defeated? Where were his loyal followers? What happened to Draco? He was not captured so where was he? Sirius' house was empty when the Aurors raided the place. And what about Ginny? He sensed that there was something different about her but what? Harry shook his head disgustedly. He was becoming Moody's younger version...so paranoid.

Harry continued his pace distractedly until he reached the Room of Requirements. He sighed as he entered the room. Waves of emotions instantly flooded his mind. This was the place where the DA was reestablished...this was where they all trained to regain what was forcibly taken from them....this was where he and Luna discovered their feelings for each other....He sat forlornly on the sofa where they usually talked about their plans for the future... plans that usually evolved around what they were going to do after graduation, the careers they were going to take and of course, the number of children they would like to have. They always had happy and colorful discussions since Luna never doubted for even a second that he would defeat Voldemort.

Now, the DA had been dissolved. Yes, they humored him for a while and their meetings continued but the ones who were already out of the school when DA was reestablished just could not be bothered by it anymore. For them, the meetings were futile and they had their own lives to live. He tried to explain his fear and suspicion about

what happened during the final battle but they simply refused to listen, dismissing his concerns as a mere aftershock. One by one, the members left the group...each giving their own reasons for leaving until only Ron, Hermione, and Neville were left but he knew they just remained out of politeness.

Later on, he himself decided to stop the sessions. He was very much aware that Ron was Quidditch Captain and a prefect, Hermione was also a prefect and leader of another study group and Neville had enough academic problems of his own. The extra time would suit them well but he was still saddened when he saw the relief on their faces when he said that. It was as if they too did not acknowledge the solidity of his belief that the nightmare was not yet over. But then again, he could not blame them. Their whole year had passed peacefully, without any threat from evil forces and without their usual dangerous adventures.

He sometimes thought that maybe he was wrong...maybe his suspicions had no basis at all... but nevertheless, he continued his solitary training to prepare for whatever was to come. It may not be Voldemort but he knew that some new dark lord would rise to power. It had always been the case... Dumbledore told him so. And if that time would come, he would personally ensure that the evil would be defeated once more. He would never allow it to take over and destroy many lives, hopes and dreams --- never again.

Feeling more alone and out of place than ever, he gradually withdrew from his circle of friends especially now that Ron and Hermione had each other and Neville had started pursuing Hannah Abbott. He knew they were worried about his growing state of depression and his manic obsession to excel in Charms, Potions, Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts --- subjects which he considered useful against evil later on. But after several failed attempts at cheering him up, they wisely kept their distance, hoping that one day everything would return to normal. Harry hoped so, too.

Right now, all that were keeping him sane were mere memories...and the mission he set for himself. Some might term it sadistic or masochistic tendencies on his part but he knew in his heart that he needed to go on... He would never forget Lucius

Malfoy's cryptic statement at the battle at the Ministry of Magic...---
'You will soon wish you had never been born....' --- nor would he forget the diabolical glint in his eyes. It was not an empty threat. The enemies were planning something...

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"Mr. Potter, what are you still doing here?" asked Professor McGonagall curiously at the boy who was currently watching his schoolmates fighting their way out of the castle to spend the much needed vacation with their families.

"Oh, Professor, sorry for not informing you earlier but I wish to stay here if it is okay with you." replied Harry quietly.

The Headmistress looked slightly taken aback but managed to regain her composure quickly. "It's alright with me but don't you want to spend some time with your relatives?"

"Luna needs me more. She has no one else and to be honest, I just don't feel like going back there." he replied truthfully.

The Headmistress nodded her head in understanding. "Well, if that's the case.... don't you worry, some of your friends are staying here as well. The Weasleys, Miss Granger and Mister Longbottom will be here to keep you company." Harry raised one eyebrow questioningly. "Arthur and Molly will be going to Egypt for a World Wizard Conference there, Hermione decided to stay here because of Ron and Neville have to take remedial classes in Potions - maybe you can help him with it since you have been quite skilled in that area." suggested the Professor hopefully.

"I'll do that. Thank you, Professor."

"You're welcome, Mr. Potter, but do me a favor, will you? Please spend some time with your friends more. I can arrange for a trip to Hogsmeade for all of you if you like." said the headmistress, apparently worried about his usually cheerful student detaching himself from everyone and everything that used to be important to him.

"I will think about it."

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"Oh, Mr. Potter, fancy seeing you here. I guess you came to visit Luna. She has made some improvements, you'll see." said Madam Pomfrey excitedly upon seeing Harry walk through the door.

Harry smiled and nodded politely. He saw Luna sitting on her bed, eagerly playing with the Rubix cube that he gave her for Christmas. He was amazed to see her actually being able to arrange it properly given her condition. Clearly, her natural intellect had not been affected by her trauma. He slowly approached her, not wanting to disrupt her concentration.

"Oh, hello Harry." Luna said immediately when she spotted him. Harry blinked in surprise and looked questioningly at the healer.

"It's really quite complicated - how the human mind works. As for Luna's case, her mind selected good memories and she only remember those. We will tell her everything eventually but for now, I advise you to be careful with what you say. She might have a relapse if she became upset about anything." explained Madam Pomfrey before she continued arranging her supply of healing potions.

"This little cube is very amazing Harry. I never thought I would have so much fun with muggle toys before. Do you have any idea when I can get out of this place?" asked Luna while she continued tinkering with the cube.

"Umm...I don't know. I will ask Madam Pomfrey later. How are you feeling now? Do you remember anything a-about about us?" asked Harry tentatively to gauge how much she could recall.

"What do you mean by 'about us'?" queried Luna, clearly perplexed by his question. Harry looked crestfallen and dropped his gaze.

"N-nothing." he lied. *'Maybe she just needs more time...'* he consoled himself.

"Oh, okay. You know I was wondering why my father has not visited me yet. Madam Pomfrey never lets me read the newspapers at all. She said it would be bad for my health but I am really bored here. Could you please tell me what's going on now?" said Luna, giving him a radiant smile. Harry sucked his breath as he stared at her first real smile since the 'unfortunate incident'. He really wished he could kiss her now and embrace her tightly but he could not... not yet at least.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"N-nothing." he shook his head slightly. *'I must look like an idiot.'*

"Umm... can't you say something aside from 'nothing'?"

"Sorry...I was just surprised, that's all." He wondered what he should tell her. He decided to concentrate on topics that he considered safe. "Well, Gryffindor won the House Cup and Quidditch Cup this year. We had the Yule Ball too. I wish you could have gone, though. It was fun, lots of food and good music."

"Who's your date to the ball then?" said Luna.

"No one. It was supposed to be you but you were still sick so I did not bother to go." he answered truthfully, curious as to what her reaction might be.

"Me? Why me? I thought you're dating Cho..."

"You're special that's why I wanted to take you. Cho and I broke up ages ago. She's going with Lee now."

"Whoa! I never would have thought Cho would go for him but I guess we cannot really judge other people's choices." said Luna without commenting on his reference to dating her.

"Yeah, we cannot judge other people's choices." he said thinking about Ginny and Luna's father.

"Harry, can you please ask Professor Flitwick to visit me soon? I know I missed a lot of classes but maybe we can arrange something to make up for my absences and be able to take my O.W.L. tests."

'It's good that she can still recall what year she's supposed to be in but how can I tell her that she already missed the tests without upsetting her?' Harry panicked slightly when he saw that Luna was watching his reaction carefully.

"It's okay if you don't want to do it, Harry. I know you might have other important things to do." said Luna, misunderstanding his reaction.

"No, it's not that, Luna. You know I would do anything for you." Luna looked mystified by his statement. "It's just that the term has already ended. I'm sorry but you already missed the O.W.L. tests....Actually, you um- missed the whole school year." he braced himself for the outburst but miraculously, Luna was still calm.

"Oh, so that explains why I could not remember any of my lessons. That's alright, Harry. I will just talk to Professor Dumbledore later. Maybe we can arrange something so I can take the tests this summer." said Luna confidently. Harry closed his eyes slightly at the mention of his fallen mentor's name.

"I'm afraid you can't, hon. But you may speak with Professor McGonagall -- s-she's the new headmistress now." said Harry cautiously, hoping against hope that she would not ask him about Dumbledore.

"Is that so? Alright, then." said Luna nonchalantly then her eyes widened slightly. "You called me 'hon'?"

Harry sighed with relief. "Don't mind that. It's just an expression." he winced at how lame his reply sounded but it was the best excuse he could think of at that particular moment. Before he could accidentally let slip more damaging remarks, he smartly called the attention of Madam Pomfrey and made a graceful exit .

"Bye, hon." He heard Luna whisper softly before he could close the door behind him.

For the first time since the tragic summer, Harry allowed himself a real smile that astounded everyone who noticed it. Feeling more alive than ever, he rushed to his bedroom and retrieved his Firebolt. He only paused for a while when he saw his bestfriend gaping idiotically at him.

"Get your broom, Ron. We're going to fly." Ron nodded dumbly, not sure if he was hearing him right but he quickly got his broom too and followed Harry to the field.

They zoomed past each other for a while, enjoying the rush of the warm breeze on their faces, unmindful of anything. Harry was in his element, accelerating his Firebolt to its maximum capacity and flew so fast that Ron could not keep up with him anymore. Ron stopped in midair and contented himself with watching his bestfriend whizzing around him with a smile that never seemed to waver. Harry was in high spirits and he was sharing it with him.

Finally, Harry halted his amazing exhibition and sat on the grass beckoning Ron to join him.

"What's up, mate?" asked Ron.

"Luna's going to be okay." said Harry happily. Then he proceeded to tell Ron about her upcoming recovery, how calm she was when he told him she missed the whole year, how beautiful she looked when she smiled at him. "She's really, really incredible!"

"Yeah, I would probably freak out." agreed Ron, glad to see his best friend join the world of the living again.

"Not only that. McGonagall told me we could go to Hogsmeade if we want to. We could all go." Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "There's just one catch, though. She doesn't remember we're a couple yet so we'll just tell her that's it's just a simple get-together okay?"

"That would still be cool! At least you can be with her again. Oh, I can't wait to tell Hermione." said Ron excitedly.

"I can't wait to tell her too." said Harry seriously then stopped at seeing his bestfriend's expression.

"Welcome back, mate." Ron said suddenly and hugged him like a long-lost brother who just found his way home. When they broke apart, their eyes were both red and unshed tears started to flow. They grinned foolishly at one another as they wiped the tears away.

"So I guess it's not just a girl thing, huh!" said Ron.

"Yeah, but we need to get rid of the evidence first or we won't hear the last of this if anyone finds out."

They both laughed at that and as they made their way to the castle, Harry vaguely wondered how crazy he had been to think that Hogwarts was a very depressing place.

Chapter 2 - The Nightmare Begins...

"My Lord, everything is going according to plan." said the small hooded figure as she knelt in front of her master.

"Excellent, you are truly worthy to be my servant. Rest assured that your efforts will not be wasted. The young man you desire shall be yours." said a high-pitched voice as he looked at the red-headed servant gazing expectantly at him.

"Thank you, my Lord."

"Master, the potions are ready. We just need the final ingredients." said another who seemed to cower at the sight of the person he referred to as his master.

"I have already secured one of the ingredients, my Lord, and the other one, I will obtain tonight." said the younger servant, clearly proud of her accomplishment and confident of her capabilities.

"Very well, you may go now. I shall await your return tonight." said the master, grinning wickedly in anticipation of the culmination of the most intricate scheme he had conceived in his entire life time.

"As you wish." With that, the young servant swished her cloak and was gone in a flash.

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Harry was totally contented at watching the flames dance merrily at the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. He smiled to himself as he recalled what happened a few hours ago. He had been so desolate then but a short trip to Luna's ward changed it all. Now, with his girlfriend's impending recovery, his life seemed to have more meaning, the future did not appear so bleak and dreary anymore. His bestfriends, Ron and Hermione, had just gone up their respective dormitories to sleep or so they say. They had already finished planning the trip to Hogsmeade for the next day and he was too excited to lie on his bed and sleep.

He eagerly contemplated on what he was going to give to Luna as a welcome-back gift and where else he was going to take her...he remembered her saying that he owed her a proper date. Well, he better make tomorrow a very memorable day for her or she might have second thoughts about their relationship. He wondered how much money he needed for the trip. He wanted to treat his friends to a wonderful time too especially Neville who still had to complete some ridiculous project to pass Snape's class. They had been extremely good friends and he had been so inconsiderate lately. Maybe they could stop by Gringott's first to be sure.

Suddenly, a shadow fell upon the wall. Harry whipped out his wand and turned to face the person.

"Luna!" exclaimed Harry at seeing the blond haired figure slowly approaching him, carrying two glasses of frothing butterbeers. Before he could ask her anything, she casually removed her cloak to reveal a nightdress that left nothing to his imagination. He stared open-mouthed as his girlfriend handed him a glass, too shocked to react. He had never seen Luna wear something like this and it made him uncomfortable and too conscious of the fact that there was no one else there but the two of them.

"Hi, Harry. Why are you so surprised? Aren't you glad to see me?" said Luna as she sat provocatively on his lap. Harry visibly tensed at her action. Luna put one slender finger on his lips. "I remember everything now, hon, and I believe I have to make up for your several months of loneliness." She lifted her glass on the air and Harry reluctantly raised his glass, too.

"Cheers!" said Luna and they both took a sip of the steaming beverage. Harry suddenly felt himself intoxicated by the drink, numbing his senses. It made him confused. Butterbeer did not affect him this way before.

Luna bent slightly forward and replaced the finger with her lips. Harry moved his lips to meet hers as he desperately tried to fight the giddiness that was threatening to overcome him. They kissed passionately, satiating the hunger that was bottled up inside them for

what seemed like eternity. But despite his languid state, Harry could still sense something different with the kiss they shared. It was so filled with lust and made him feel guilty unlike the ones they shared before.

"My, my, you're really such a great kisser." said Luna breathlessly as her hand caressed his muscled chest. "And you have a sexy body, too. All the girls would be envious if they see us like this." she mumbled. Harry groaned but he was not sure if it was due to the headache or the tempting siren in front of him. With considerable effort on his part, he pried her hands away from him and tried to stare directly at her eyes.

The girl immediately lowered her face. "Why did you stop, hon?" her disappointment was evident in her voice. "Don't you want me anymore?"

"N-no! It's just that...this does not feel right. We should not be doing this right now." whispered Harry as he lovingly caressing her cheek.

"Why not?"

"I d-don't know..." He could not explain it but after months of waiting, he suddenly felt unwilling to get intimate with her.

"Well, then let's drink some more. Cheers.... to Victory!"

Unable to refuse Luna, Harry drank again until he felt the glass gradually slip from his fingers. His eyes became very heavy... *'No, I will not lose consciousness...I will not lose consciousness... I won'...* His green eyes widened with shock as he saw Luna transforming before him...

"YOU!" he mumbled weakly.

"Yes, me..." the girl smiled wickedly at him. "Damn this potion. I forgot to drink some more...tsk..tsk..tsk...It spoiled all the fun."

"What did you put in my drink?"

"Hmm....let's see...three drops of very strong sleeping potion like what you did to Draco. But we made some improvements --- it contains poison, too. But don't worry, it does not induce instantaneous death...you will still probably enjoy a few months of torture before your body gives up on you."

Harry's face fell at her reply.

"By the way, how did you like my kiss? I wonder how Loony would feel about this if she found out..." said the girl, taunting him. "Look at me, Harry. Would you like to take me right now? Come on, I'm willing...consider it your last meal before you die..." With that, the girl laughed and started to sway her hips provocatively to an imaginary music, slowly undressing herself as she did so.

"W-what do you want from me?" Harry managed to ask without looking at the tempting sight.

"Nothing. It's my master who needs something from you." The girl straddled him and forced his face to look at her glorious nakedness. For a split second, he got a good view of the tantalizing body with perfect bosom bouncing slightly as she wiggled on his lap but he managed to close his eyes in time. Whatever she put in his drink was starting to overwhelm him now.

"Why are you doing this...?" asked Harry and he was surprised to notice a wistful smile cross her lovely face.

"I liked you very much, you know. But you never returned my feelings... Now I want to give you a taste of what you've missed." The girl violently peeled off his clothing and Harry could feel her lips traveling from his neck to his chest...

"Malfoy will hate you if he found out." he said, still trying very hard to resist the temptation.

"He won't find out unless you tell...and I know you won't say anything because you don't want to hurt your pathetic girlfriend's feeling." she replied confidently as she continued to torment him. "Besides, you won't like it if my protective brothers found out that you're trying to uh-

force yourself on me...out of --let's see...sexual frustration..."

"You won't get away from this!" he said without much conviction as he felt himself falling into a deep sleep.

"Is that so? I thought I already did." said Ginny triumphantly as he slumped unconscious on her shoulders.

"Cheers...to Voldemort's Victory!"

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"My Lord, I have already brought your mortal enemy. He is with Wormtail right now." said Ginny on bended knee.

"Very good. You have accomplished more than all my death-eaters put together. You even surpassed your mentor's capabilities. I am impressed." said the master, clapping his clawed hands slightly to show his appreciation.

The girl looked pleased to know that her master regarded her now with more importance than he did with Bellatrix, her mentor who had sacrificed herself for their mission.

"Thank you, my Lord. With your permission, I wish to see Draco before I leave." she said meekly, hoping that the master would not find her request impertinent.

"Not now, my child. You finish your task first and I will arrange for you to spend the night with him." said the master like a father admonishing his overeager child for wanting too much too soon. He clicked his fingers and soon Wormtail and someone who looked like Harry Potter approached him.

"Ahh, Lucius...I trust you know what to do. Take the girl with you and ensure that tomorrow, Harry Potter's saintly reputation shall be ruined without any doubt." his pitch went higher than usual in his excitement.

"I shall be very honored to do that, Master. We shall go now."

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The Gryffindor common room was still deserted when they reached the place. The sofa was drenched with the spilled beverage from Harry's glass and its seat cover was in disarray. Ginny's underwear was still lying on the floor where she left it carelessly after Harry had passed out -- a detrimental piece of information that did not escape her companion's probing eyes.

"I wonder what you have been doing with Potter here before..." he said, as he eyed Ginny's cloak and the undergarments maliciously.

"What do you care?" she replied defiantly. She would never allow the man to know that his lustful gaze was making her nervous.

"My foolish son might be livid with rage but frankly, I don't give a damn. Let me see what my good-for-nothing son and that damn Potter found so fascinating..." he started to remove her cloak but Ginny managed to slap his hand away, backing slightly against the wall.

"W-what is the meaning of this, Lucius? This is not part of the deal." she said desperately. This time she was not successful in hiding her anxiety. "And why are you calling Draco a good-for-nothing son? He is very loyal to our master and he does everything he asks him to do."

"Didn't you hear our master saying that we need to destroy his reputation? And what's a better way to do that than be caught ravishing the minister's daughter while his girlfriend was going crazy in the hospital wing..." Seeing her terrified state, he continued. "You would not want me to inform our master that you're being uncooperative, would you? My foolish son defied him once and he's still suffering at one of the cells in the dungeon." With an expert motion of his hand, her cloak fell helplessly on her feet revealing her nakedness once more.

Ginny closed her eyes in fright and tried to shield her body from his

view. "P-please don't do this, Lucius. Think of your son...he loves me and I love him...please don't do this to us..." she pleaded but the man was already undressing himself and staring at her mercilessly.

"Now, why would I deprive myself of intense physical pleasure just for that ungrateful son of mine? You even offered yourself willingly to Potter...why not to me? You're a whore, Weasley, and I will treat you as such!" Lucius started kissing her with his hands pinching and touching her everywhere as she cried and struggled desperately to break free.

"No, please don't! Nothing happened between Harry and me." She flinched as he squeezed her tender breast ruthlessly while he bit the other. She prayed that someone would go down soon. The sun was almost up and there was still chance for her to be saved if only..."NOOOO!" she screamed as she felt his hands roughly pulling her legs apart. With all the strength she could muster, she kicked her assailant at his weakest point.

She heard the familiar noise of several people rushing down the stairs at once. Rescue, at last! She saw Lucius grab a vial from the pocket of his robe and drank the contents quickly before the others reached the bottom of the stairs.

Ron, Hermione and Neville took one good look at the dishevelled girl clutching her cloak desperately to her chest and at the other one calmly putting his clothes on. Without any need for an explanation, Ron immediately ran and threw his strongest punch at Harry while Neville hesitated for a moment before following his lead. Hermione was too shocked for words at seeing the grisly sight before her.

'YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH! WHY DID YOU DO THAT TO MY SISTER?!? I TRUSTED YOU AND TREATED YOU LIKE A BROTHER AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?' he yelled in fury, while throwing another nasty blow on his chest.

"Your whore of a sister enjoyed it, too. Why don't you ask her? We've been doing this for some time, you know...she just wanted it more rough now but I guess she changed her mind." replied Harry nonchalantly while throwing a warning glare at the panic-stricken girl

who seemed too scared to actually say anything.

The three looked even more disgusted at his reply. Never in their life could they imagine that they would regard Harry, the saviour of the wizarding world, with so much loathing as they did now. They could not believe it and with Ginny, too! They noticed that something was wrong with him when he started alienating himself from everyone but they thought it was just his way of coping with the traumatic events that happened. It never occurred to them that Harry was hiding some abhorable secrets.

"NEVILLE, GET MCGONAGALL NOW!" yelled Hermione at once as she approached Ginny.

Hermione recovered her clothes and helped her get dressed so that she would at least look decent enough and prevent her from feeling more humiliated than she already had. Within minutes, a panting Headmistress came rushing through the door followed by Professor Snape who was also alarmed and curious about the incident.

"Miss Weasley, what happened to you?" Professor McGonagall's face was immediately filled with concern as she took in her distraught appearance.

"PROFESSOR! HAR ---THIS SEX MANIAC TRIED TO RAPE MY SISTER EARLIER! WE SAW IT!" screamed a red-faced Ron as he pointed his trembling finger at Harry, his anger was so extreme that he could not even pronounce the name of his former bestfriend.

"Ha-harry?" said Professor McGonagall incredulously. The other professor also appeared skeptical about the accusation. "But why?" She was clearly not expecting this unpleasant turn of events especially when she just had a talk with him yesterday. He was so happy then and he even asked for permission to go to Hogsmeade with Luna and his friends.

"I DON'T KNOW, PROFESSOR. I HAVE NO IDEA HOW HIS EVIL MIND WORKS." yelled Ron, unable to contain his temper.

"Is this true, Miss Weasley?" asked the Headmistress gently so as

not to frighten the child.

"ISN'T IT BLOODY OBVIOUS?!? WE CAME AS SOON AS WE HEARD THE COMMOTION AND WE SAW GINNY NAKED AND CRYING HYSTERICALLY WHILE THIS BASTARD WAS CALMLY PUTTING HIS CLOTHES ON!"

"I AM NOT TALKING TO YOU, MR. WEASLEY, AND YOU DON'T NEED TO YELL. I CAN HEAR YOU PERFECTLY." shouted the Headmistress in exasperation.

"Is what your brother said true, Miss Weasley?" McGonagall repeated the question but again, she refused to say anything. Respecting her silence for the mean time, she turned to Harry. "What about you, Mr. Potter? What can you say about Mr. Weasley's allegation?"

"I did not rape her. It was just a misunderstanding." replied Harry. The Headmistress and the other professors looked relieved at his statement. Unfortunately, their relief was short-lived. "As I have said to Ron a while ago, we have been doing it for quite some time now. She suggested that we make it rough for once but I guess she changed her mind."

Everyone cringed at his choice of words but Harry was not quite finished with shocking them yet.

"You have a delectable sister, Ron. An over-used piece of meat after Draco got tired of her...but still tasty. She was willing to be my whore while Luna was in the hospital wing. Have you tried her? I assure you she's better than your pr-----"

WHACK!

"YOU'RE DESPICABLE! HOW DARE YOU SUGGEST SUCH A THING TO RON!" exclaimed Hermione, finding his words extremely repulsive. Ginny recoiled at his words, too, but she could not say anything to defend herself. Instead, she clung to Hermione and sobbed vulnerably. She knew that one mistake on her part could cause Draco's life.

"Why? Can't handle the truth? Ginny had been fantasizing about you for months now, Ron. " said Harry, taking great pleasure at the look of pure astonishment and disbelief on everyone's faces.

Everyone in the room looked more appalled than ever. They could not believe that Harry would do such a thing and say such revolting words. Harry Potter was the savior of the wizarding world -- how could he turn bad? They all stared with absolute contempt at the boy wearing an ugly smirk on his face and looking very smug.

"SILENCIO!" an infuriated McGonagall stopped him from saying any more malicious insinuations. "Never have I encountered such abominable behaviour such as yours, Mr. Potter. What you have done to Miss Weasley was unforgivable so was the utter disrespect you have shown us." her voice was shaking with anger as she used the summoning charm to retrieve Harry's wand and broke it neatly into half. "You need not come for the next term. Consider yourself expelled from this school. The Minister shall be informed of your actions and the Wizengamot shall decide on the appropriate punishment for you."

"Wait! We should not be hasty about this, Minerva. Are you sure this is Potter?" said Professor Snape unexpectedly. He was watching the boy carefully and much as he hated his very existence, he just could not help but be wary of the sudden turn of events.

"HOW COULD HE NOT BE? WE LEFT HIM HERE LAST NIGHT!" exclaimed Ron, but his voice wavered a little as he said the words.

Harry just rolled his eyes as if he was too bored with the discussion.

"I wish you are right, Severus. There is only one way to find out. Please bring your strongest Veritaserum here." said a very tired-looking Headmistress.

Snape went to get the potion and was back in a flash. Everyone watched in nervous anticipation as Harry drank the potion. Professor McGonagall quickly removed the silencing charm and started questioning him.

"State your name." said the Headmistress, silently praying that this was just a replay of what happened to Moody a few years back.

"Harry James Potter."

Everyone gasped in awe and disappointment. They were apparently expecting a different response from him.

"Why did you do that to Miss Weasley?" asked the Headmistress again although she was not sure if she wanted to hear the answer.

"No particular reason. I am just bored and she's there." said Harry simply. More gasps of horror.

"Mr. Potter, what are your future plans after you leave Hogwarts?" said Snape when he noticed that McGonagall was too distraught to continue.

"I plan to conquer the Wizarding World." said Harry, relishing the words that escaped from his lips.

Hermione cried after hearing his reply. Where had they gone wrong? She thought everything was fine...maybe they should not have left him alone to ponder his evil plans....maybe they should have shown him more that they still care for him...maybe...

"H-harry, what happened to you?" asked Neville weakly as he stared at the person who was once his most trusted friend.

"I did not know you were that stupid, Longbottom. Did you really believe I killed Voldemort to save the world?" Neville cringed at his curt reply and slumped to one of the chairs in defeat.

"That's enough, Potter. We do not need to hear any more. Professor Snape shall stay with you until the Ministry representatives arrive here." said the distressed Headmistress as she left the room to inform the wizard authorities.

"Whatever you say, darling..."

Chapter 3 - The Struggle Within...

"To the dungeon, Potter. One false move and you're dead." said Snape menacingly at Harry, with his wand poised to attack at any sign of suspicious movement on his part. He half-expected the young man to retaliate but amazingly, he obliged. He just casted one warning glare at the youngest Weasley and he was off.

Hermione watched the retreating figure of the bespectacled young man with narrowed eyes as he made his way to the dungeon with casual indifference -- very un-Harry like. She had known Harry for six years now. In her eyes, he had always been kind, brave and loyal to his friends. Never in those six years had she noticed even a tiny hint that he had a tendency to go over the dark side...he loathed anything and anyone evil. She desperately wanted to believe that the foul creature who just left was just impersonating her best friend...but what about the Veritaserum?

She looked around to see if anyone else was thinking along those lines and she saw a very enraged Ron whose hands were bloodied after attacking the wall of the common room but there were tears in his eyes as well -- hurt and disappointment clearly written on his face. Neville was staring questioningly at Ginny as if silently willing her to suddenly stand up and yell, "Hey, everyone! It's just a joke!" but nothing came. She, herself, felt numb with disbelief.

Was Harry really a bomb waiting to explode? Was he just bidding his time as what he claimed a while ago? They were his closest friends -- - why didn't they notice? But he was always alone this past few months, always finding excuses not to spend time with them....and they, too absorbed with their own life, let him deal with his dilemma ON HIS OWN. Merlin! Maybe they were not such good friends after all...

"Don't blame yourself. It's not your fault." said Ginny quietly, startling the wits out of Hermione.

"H-how did you know?" Hermione looked curiously at Ginny's unfathomable expression as she gathered herself and prepared to leave the room.

"Your face is very easy to read." said the younger girl, her fear suddenly replaced with regret and guilt but nobody noticed.

"I can't help it!" cried Hermione. "Harry was so kind, brave...always willing to help his friends....thinking of others' safety more than -----"

"That was before he killed Voldemort!" said Ron furiously but his tone was noticeably lower now. The shock had worn off and he was having some serious doubts of his own. A few minutes of tensed silence surrounded the group. Finally, Ginny excused herself, claiming that she needed to go to the hospital wing.

"I'll go with you." said Hermione distractedly.

"No, I'm fine. I would like to be alone for now if you don't mind." said Ginny and she ran out of the room before any of them could argue.

"Err, Hermione, d-do you think it is possible that the potion malfunctioned?" asked Neville, breaking the silence that followed.

"I hope so..." she replied weakly then a sudden thought came to her mind. "Ron, do you still remember the time when Harry told us about the death-eater trial he saw at Dumbledore's pensieve?"

"Yeah and your point?"

"Well, I don't recall him saying the ministry officials made them drink the potion first before the inquisition, do you?" said Hermione, her mind spinning as if she was trying to figure out a very complex puzzle.

Ron shook his head slightly and now that he thought about it, he wondered why. According to Harry, many well-known death-eaters were cleared of charges then including Malfoy and some stupid fools who were now serving the ministry. They would have been convicted if the ministry simply administered the potion to them. Maybe the truth serum was not really one hundred percent reliable...

"I don't know about you but as for me, I did not notice Harry doing anything aside from his usual routine. He did not even have a fight with anyone this year. He had just been....well ---silent." said Neville.

Ron sighed. "Not to mention alone. I know what you mean -- nobody could change that fast and even if we had been busy, we would have noticed if something strange was going on with him."

"Exactly!" said Hermione then she eyed Ron cautiously before she continued. "That's why I thought we should do now what we should have done several months ago."

"What's that?" asked Ron suspiciously. He could sense from Hermione's furtive glances that he was not going to like the answer.

"I think we should talk to Ginny....I mean really talk --- about what happened when she was captured. She managed to answer some of our questions when she was at the hospital wing but after that...we kind of umm-just pretended that everything was back to normal." replied Hermione nervously as she waited for his reaction.

"Are you insinuating something?" inquired Ron, his temper rising dangerously again.

"No, I'm not. I'm merely stating a fact." said Hermione defiantly. "We have to admit we had been lax with her. We should have verified her statements!"

"Please don't be mad, Ron. Hermione has a point. What if Ginny's lying?" said a little voice that was Neville's.

Ron stared incredulously at the two of them but to their surprise, he just sank to one of the chairs and cried, grasping his head violently. "I'm so confused! I don't know what to think anymore. Merlin, we were just so happy yesterday! We're even planning for a trip to Hogsmeade today..."

"Hey, Ron, if it's any consolation to you, I'm sure all of us are confused right now. I mean, no one wants Harry or Ginny to turn bad...." said Hermione as she hugged the distraught Ron. She knew that it was doubly hard for him for it concerns not only his bestfriend but also his beloved youngest sister.

Neville stared at the roaring fire and at the sofa that was still soaking with butterbeer. Frowning slightly at the two glasses, he tried to

picture in his mind what had probably happened earlier. Judging from the position of the glasses, he assumed that the two were sitting rather closely. One glass was half empty and was sitting securely on the center table while the other glass obviously fell, dark liquid dripping all over the sofa. There was a purple stain as well but he deemed it irrelevant to the case. Was the fallen glass Ginny's or Harry's? If Ron said that they left Harry alone here last night, then sometime afterwards, Ginny must have arrived with the butterbeers. But why would she go down so late at night, bringing beverages as if she expected Harry to be there? *'This is really confusing.'*

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"THIS IS SIMPLY OUTRAGEOUS!!! WHY WOULD HARRY DO SUCH A THING? HOW DARE YOU ACCUSE HIM OF SUCH ATROCITY!" The hysterical feminine voice ranted on and on.

Ron, Neville and Hermione hurried outside to see who had arrived. It was Harry's aunt and cousin followed by a weary looking minister and a perplexed headmistress. The former were livid with rage as they all went to Snape's dungeon.

The three surreptitiously followed the group to find out what was going to happen next.

"--- HARRY SAVED THE WIZARDING WORLD AND YOU PAY HIM WITH THIS --- NONSENSE?!?"

"HARRY WOULD NEVER DREAM OF DOING THAT!" said a very angry Dudley too though he looked less menacing now that he had lost some weight.

"Please stop! Your screaming is hurting my ears." pleaded McGonagall as she glared at the two.

"I WILL SAY WHATEVER I WANT IF IT CONCERNS MY NEPHEW!" said Petunia furiously as she glared back at the headmistress.

The three rolled their eyes at that. Years before, Petunia also maltreated Harry but now she was singing an entirely different tune. The whole group stopped in front of Snape's office.

"Severus, kindly open the door now. The minister and the boy's guardian are here." said Professor McGonagall while silently pleading the others to be calm. They waited for a while but the door did not open. The headmistress knocked some more.

"Uh-oh! I have a bad feeling about this." whispered Ron to Hermione and Neville as they watched the headmistress anxiously eyeing the doorknob. It was locked.

"Um-can't you use '*alohamora*' to open that door, professor?" said Hermione.

"I'm afraid I can't, Miss Granger. After someone broke into his office and stole some of his ingredients years ago, Severus charmed this door so that only him can open it." Fortunately, the Headmistress was too troubled to notice the peculiar look that passed between Ron and Hermione. "But I guess, I could do something. Stand back everyone." said the Headmistress then she blasted the door of Snape's office.

The group stared in shock at the wreckage that greeted their sight. Aside from the remnants of the shattered door, there was a pool of fallen potion on the floor. Cauldrons looked as if somebody smashed them to wall and from the looks of it, it has probably been. The once pristine cabinet of ingredients were now hanging open and covered with some slimy substance that they did not wish to identify. Papers were scattered everywhere and one arm was dangling limply from the ----

"DAD, IT'S SNAPE!" exclaimed Ron in shock as he pointed one shaking finger to the unconscious figure of a man on top of a shelf.

Professor McGonagall quickly levitated the man's body as the others looked for Harry.

"Professor, he's not here!" said Hermione in panic as her eyes scanned the room.

"P-Potter escaped..." They all turned to look at the Potions Master who was slowly coming around but his eyes were still unfocused.

"What happened, Severus?" asked the Minister through gritted teeth. He was very upset about what happened to his only daughter but he was willing to keep an open mind. After all, Harry was like a son to him.

"I have some doubts about his statements earlier so when we arrived here, I started to interrogate him again --"

"You mean there's a way to counteract the veritaserum?" asked Hermione eagerly, cutting Snape off.

"Yes, of course, Miss Know-it-all Granger, that is why it was never used during Ministry trials." replied Snape haughtily. Hermione only managed a soft 'Oh!' as Snape glared at her for interrupting. "As I was saying, I tried to use Occlumency to find out the truth but before I could do that, Potter attacked me."

"H-Harry attacked you?" asked Petunia with eyes narrowed in skepticism. Dudley's mouth was also hanging open in disbelief.

"Unfortunately, yes. He sent very strong curses at me until I passed out." Finished Snape and shot dagger looks at them all, threatening them not to ask further questions because he was clearly not in the mood to elaborate on the gruesome details of his humiliating defeat.

"B-but how could he? You saw me break his wand a while ago." said Professor McGonagall in amazement.

"Apparently, he had another one tucked inside his cloak." said Snape, a little miffed that Harry had caught him off guard. The minister and the headmistress looked at one another meaningfully then came to a decision.

"Where's Ginny? Maybe she's in a right state to enlighten us now." declared Professor McGonagall.

"She's in the hospital wing, Professor." replied Neville.

The group marched to the hospital wing at once. All uncharacteristically silent and secretly afraid of what they might find out. To their surprise, they found Madam Pomfrey singing quite contentedly as she concocted some healing potions --- without a trace of distress or anxiety.

"Good day, Headmistress. Why are you all here? Came to visit Luna? She's doing better now. I dare say she'll be ready for the next term." she chattered happily but her expression rapidly changed to worry as she noticed the somber expressions of the visitors, the cuts and bruises in Professor Snape's face and the untimely visit of the Minister of Magic who was supposed to be at a wizard conference abroad.

"We came here for Miss Weasley, Poppy." stated McGonagall, her lips pursed in a straight line.

"But Miss Weasley did not come here, Professor." said Madam Pomfrey, apparently confused.

"What about Harry? Did he visit Luna earlier?" The school nurse shook her head.

"Luna was quite disappointed cause he always used to come here in the morning and share breakfast with her but he did not. I wondered about it too but I assumed he went on vacation." said Madam Pomfrey then upon seeing their unease she went on. "Is there something wrong, Minerva?"

"Yes, Poppy. Harry allegedly tried to molest Miss Weasley and he attacked Severus. Now, both of them are gone. I have no idea yet on what's going on but for the mean time, please ensure Luna's safety. I have a feeling that this will concern her somehow." said the headmistress grimly. Then she turned to Arthur who was too numb for words and Snape.

"I really have a bad feeling about this. Can you inform the rest of the Order Members that I wish to discuss this latest development as soon as possible? Shall we say tonight - if they're available." she said with her usual no-nonsense attitude and Arthur and Snape immediately

went on their way bringing the still stunned Petunia and Dudley with them.

"Is there something that we can do to help?" asked Hermione.

Professor McGonagall hesitated for a moment before she replied. "Yes, there is. Please find out if Miss Weasley is still within the school grounds and inform me immediately." Then she added as an afterthought, "The three of you can join the meeting tonight."

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"Where are we going, Hermione?" asked Ron as Hermione dragged him and Neville out of the Gryffindor common room.

They just finished checking the Marauders Map that they 'borrowed' from Harry's trunk and a thorough scrutiny confirmed their fear that Ginny left the castle. They had conflicting emotions about that but after a few minutes of heated discussion, they all agreed that maybe Ginny just needed time to sort out her feelings on her own. A day or two won't hurt and they could talk to her as soon as she got back.

"To the kitchen, of course. You want to eat, don't you?" Ron and Neville smiled slightly at that. "And I want to ask the elves something." said Hermione, her face set with determination.

As expected, the house-elves were elated to see three of their favorite people at Hogwarts. They eagerly served them with a scrumptious selection of pudding, pancakes, pastries, juices, milk and fruits.

"I wonder why Harry Potter do not come down here." said Dobby as he refilled their plates with more goodies.

The three immediately stiffened at hearing their friend's name.

"Um-Dobby, were you by any chance, cleaning the common room last night?" asked Hermione tentatively.

"Yes, missy, I was." replied the house-elf, beaming proudly at everyone. "In fact, I saw master Harry Potter there. He was staring at the fire and smiling to himself. He was so happy so Dobby did not disturb his peace."

"And?" prompted Ron. Dobby looked confused at his question.

"Er, he was asking if you saw anything else." supplied Neville helpfully.

"Dobby?" said Hermione, a little irritated at his delayed response.

"Oh, sorry, missy. Dobby was just so happy at seeing the great Harry Potter smile again." said the house-elf, almost dancing in glee.

"Did you see anything else?" pressed Hermione.

"None, missy. Dobby left right after cleaning the common room."

"Oh!" Hermione's face fell in disappointment. No witnesses to the incident. Great...just great and judging from the boys' glum expressions, they already reached the same conclusion. Seeing that they would not get more information, the three quietly finished their meal and thanked the house-elves for their help.

"Dobby, we're having some problems right now and we need your help. Can you please tell the others to be more vigilant and report any suspicious activities to us?" said Ron reluctantly before they left.

"Yes, Mister Wheezy, the house-elves are always willing to help the friends of the great Harry Potter!"

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"Where to now?" inquired Ron, who was slightly getting impatient at not learning anything relevant. "No, don't tell. I'm guessing you're going to drag us next to the library." he said sullenly.

"Well, that's the next logical thing to do, sweetie." replied Hermione in a mockingly sweet voice.

"Maybe we could find some thing about wizards that went bad...like Peter Pettigrew. He was also from Gryffindor, right? And he was friends with Harry's parents and he still switched to the dark side." said Neville. Ron instantly looked pissed at his comment.

"I sincerely hope there's a logical explanation for this or history might repeat itself." he said venomously, the tone of his voice left little doubt as to what he meant.

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"NOTHING!" screamed Hermione in frustration, banging the precious books on the table without a care to the torn covers and slightly oxidized pages. Luckily, Madam Pince was on vacation, too or she would find herself in big trouble for attempted destruction of school property.

The boys said nothing...they just stared blankly at the nearby wall. They had spent a very exhausting afternoon browsing through voluminous books --- including Hogwarts, A History and the latest edition of the Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts --- but much to their dismay and annoyance, they did not find anything remotely useful to their current predicament.

"DAMN THIS BOOKS!" Both boys raised their eyebrows at hearing her curse the books that was so much a part of her life. Her usually unpoluted vocabulary was now severely tainted in their opinion. They would have teased her mercilessly at any other occasion but not this time...definitely not this time. Then, before their very eyes, the cool and collected almighty goddess of Gryffindor (that's what they lovingly call her because she has both beauty and brains but of course they don't say it in her face...she might get strange ideas) broke down completely and gripped the table for support as if she was too weak to stand on her own.

"Why can't we find something, Ron...Neville?" she wailed, desperately leafing through another book but her tears had temporarily blurred her vision. Finally, she gave up and sank to one of the chairs. "I refuse to believe that Harry would do such a thing! I

cannot accept it!" she flung her arms around Ron and sobbed helplessly.

Ron did not know what to say but he wrapped his arms around her, sharing her grief and intensely struggling within himself to believe that Harry was innocent. They already went through too much.....he just had to be. Neville could not bear to look at them any more. He, too, had his own doubts and was only hanging on to a vague instinct that they were just missing one little clue. As he recalled all that Harry had done for him and for everybody else he barely knew, he hesitantly stood up and carefully returned the books to their shelves with the words '*Harry, what happened to you?*' echoing over and over in his head.

Chapter 4 - A Nightmare of Her Own

It was fun, seeing Harry squirming nervously under her like that. To be honest, it had been very liberating to be able to finally seduce the boy who had purposely ignored her feelings for several years and not be affected by it. She had Draco...she got her revenge...but was it worth it? She winced at the recollection of her frightening ordeal with Draco's father a while ago. It seemed that she got more than what she bargained for. She was playing a very dangerous game...and maybe...just maybe...she had been wrong.

She had been so naive...pathetically hanging on to her foolish desire to be loved -- if not by Harry Potter then by someone equally great...equally handsome and brave -- and Draco - the hero of Slytherin House - was there, quite attractive in his own right and smitten with her innocent beauty. Their constant proximity weakened his resistance and unbeknownst to all, their relationship flourished.

It was not just mere physical attraction anymore. She had discovered that deep inside, Draco was also a nice and sensitive person. The haughty demeanor was just an act, a curse of the Malfoy name. They shared each others dreams and fears. They made each other laugh despite everything that was happening around them. They built their own world at Grimmauld Place hoping that the dream would not end but like all dreams, they had to wake up to face the harsh reality. And it was a very rude awakening on their part -- Draco was expected to take the Dark Mark and Ginny was the enemy.

One way or another, they both had to choose. Assuming that it was expected of her, Ginny voluntarily surrendered herself to Voldemort's commands, not entirely realizing the repercussions of her hasty compliance or what her submission would entail. She blindly followed her heart and to hell with the consequences. She felt so smart and mature then, truly believing that their love story would never end up like Romeo and Juliet - a muggle novel that she was fond of. But she became apprehensive as the days passed by. Despite her efforts, Draco slowly drifted away from her until one day, he did not return to their domicile. She did not understand. How could it end up like that.

She felt terrible. She cried for almost a week, thoroughly distraught and blaming only herself. Then a death-eater meeting was held and it provided her with a thread of hope. Voldemort casually dropped hints that Draco was having some doubts about her loyalty and that he could not envision himself having a future with someone who was totally different from him. The Dark Lord also implied that Draco's absence was due to a very delicate mission that he only assigns to his most devoted followers. It made her think.

After the meeting, Voldemort singled her out and enticed her with a proposal that she could not refuse --- Be a spy and she would earn Draco's trust and respect... Be a spy and she would be considered as one of the most powerful sorceress alive.... What person in his or her right mind would decline? Boy, that sounded so cool! Spies were always regarded with much reverie and respect and to be a spy at her age? It was simply awesome! So she agreed - like a child eager to try something new. And her mission was not even that difficult to achieve. She merely had to ensure that she could get back to the light side's good graces and extract as much relevant information as she could get without anyone being suspicious. The attack at the Ministry was just an elaborate cover-up. No one was supposed to get hurt. It seemed so easy.

Actually, it WAS so easy...until things started to get out of hand. Her tasks became more and more sickening and that was when she came to realize that the Dark Lord was training her to become the next Bellatrix Lestrange, the spy who used her alluring charms to get what she wanted. Harry Potter was her first target. She vaguely remembered the mocking tone of the Dark Lord when he asked her if she minded seducing Harry. Mind? Would she mind seducing the majestically handsome teenager she had a crush on for years? Was he dumb? It was too late when she figured that the Dark Lord had, in fact, been incessantly brilliant when he concocted the plan.

Now, she had no choice but to continue or she and her family might bear the brunt of Voldemort's wrath. She could not even return to Hogwarts because sooner or later, someone would cleverly uncover the truth. She felt guilty, yes, who wouldn't? In fact, it had been nagging her conscience since the task was handed to her though she had to admit that she had also been secretly excited at the prospect.

But she was afraid....deathly afraid... and she was trapped by her own impulsiveness. How could she back out now? There was too much at stake.

Then, there was the thing with Lucius Malfoy, that evil bastard! Much as she hated what happened, she had to admit that at least they achieved their goal. Voldemort would be highly pleased and she would not be punished. People would begin to doubt the sincerity of the boy who lived and she would soon reap her reward. She just hoped that Lucius would not mention her 'uncooperativeness' a while ago - that would simply be disastrous. But what disobedient act did Draco commit to earn him such severe punishment? Well, she could only suppose that Lucius was lying. After all, Voldemort himself stated that he sent Draco on a delicate mission.

Feeling more confused than ever, Ginny made her way to Hogsmeade and apparated from there. Voldemort was waiting for her.

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Ginny immediately bowed upon seeing her master.

"My lord, you shall be pleased to know that the plan had been executed to perfection." she said, trying to conceal the nervousness in her voice.

"Yes, Lucius had already informed me. Unfortunately, he had also said something that was quite annoying to my ears. He said you had some minor disagreement earlier...perhaps you could explain." said the Dark Lord evenly but Ginny could sense a coldness there that implied several hours or possibly weeks of physical torture if she failed to provide him with a plausible excuse.

"I-it was an act, My Lord. House-elves might be listening and I wanted everything to look real." she replied, adopting a light and casual tone.

"Really?" He sneered at her then turned to Wormtail who was hovering at the door, as usual. "Wormtail, bring her to the dungeon.

Don't give her food. Let her suffer for a week." Then he returned his mocking gaze to the terrified girl. "You should have invented a more convincing alibi."

Wormtail immediately seized her arm and dragged her along a dank and smelly corridor.

"You're lucky that you only got this for punishment." whispered Wormtail to the scared girl.

"You mean, there are worse?" she asked, licking her lips nervously.

"He could have killed you or fed you to the wolves." he replied without much emotion then upon seeing her frantic expression, he added. "You've been so blind, girl." He shook his head remorsefully and Ginny was surprised to see him looking so defeated. "We've been so blind."

"Well, well...Fancy seeing you here, my little whore!" The two stopped to glare at the formidable figure blocking their path.

"I swear I'm going to make you pay." hissed Ginny angrily and took a few steps backward as Lucius approached her.

"Not a very smart move. You should not have defied me earlier." He smirked slightly as his eyes maliciously checked out her slender curves. "You would have enjoyed it, you know. My son is nothing compared to me."

"BASTARD!" she slapped his spiteful face with all the strength left in her body, unable to contain her temper anymore.

"How dare you!" Lucius retaliated by pinning her forcefully to the wall and assaulting her trembling mouth with such ferocity that she found it difficult to breathe. His hands started to invade her private parts once more and Ginny was instantly frozen with fear. But suddenly, two exceptionally strong arms yanked the monster away from her and hauled him violently to the floor.

"Wormtail?" Lucius stared disbelievingly at his assailant.

Ginny could only whimper in surprise, glad that Wormtail was there but still horrified. She had been attacked twice by the same man and on the same day. Both times, she had been saved but would she always be that lucky?

"Leave her alone, Lucius. The master has plans for her." said Wormtail with uncharacteristic hostility in his voice.

Regaining his composure, Lucius hastily stood up and assumed a dignified stance. "Next time you won't be as fortunate." he spat and left without saying another word.

The two visibly relaxed and continued their journey quietly but Ginny could sense that something was bothering her companion.

"What is it, Wormtail?" she ventured.

The thin man scrutinized her expression, judging her sincerity and her ability to handle what he was about to tell her.

"Do you regret your decision now?" he asked instead.

Ginny was taken aback by his question. She was not expecting that, least of all from him. She decided to play it safe. "Why do you ask? Do you?"

"I wish I could turn back time..." he then replied without so much as a glance at her direction.

"What do you mean?"

Wormtail fearfully scanned the room before he frantically whispered his reply, muttering so fast that Ginny could only make out the words "Holocaust", "Lost Prophecy", and "must save Harry" from his rantings. She would have requested him to repeat his statement but seeing his edginess, she knew it would be too much to ask.

"Listen, Ginny, you don't have the Dark Mark yet and neither does Draco. You do realize that Draco refused, don't you?" he said in an

urgent whisper but the girl only looked shocked at the revelation.

"You mean Draco is really being punished here? B-but Voldemort said he just sent him on a ---"

"Voldemort is a manipulative son-of-a-bitch!" he cut her off. "You saw what he did to Bellatrix and you still believed him? What kind of a fool are you? He used you. He tricked you into believing that that is what Draco wants. I'll be damned but you've been blinder than I thought! Draco refused because of you. He loves you...loves you so much that he was willing to suffer here than lead you to a life of eternal damnation."

"Oh, my God!" Ginny bit her lip as the pieces of the puzzle slowly fit together in her mind. "Why didn't you tell me before?" she cried in anguish.

"I wanted to but I did not have the chance." replied Wormtail as he led her to a cell with a lone and unconscious occupant in it. "Look at Draco. Who would have thought that Voldemort would do that to the only son of his most loyal servant? But he doesn't care what happened to his minions. For him, his slaves are just pawns in his pathetic war games...something to be discarded if they had already outlived their usefulness."

Reluctantly, he pushed her in. "I don't know what will happen now but please try to figure out a way to escape and I'll help you in whatever way I can. I don't want you to suffer the same fate and live a life of regret." Then he added reluctantly, "...like me.."

"What about Harry? I put some poison in his drink!" she panicked slightly at the recollection. *"I'm sorry, Harry!"*

"Don't worry, I already gave him the antidote. He'll live." he averted his gaze. He was fully aware of the Dark Lord's plan to dispose of him as soon as Lucius fulfills the next part of his most intricate scheme but he did not have the heart to inform the girl about that. She was already consumed with so much guilt and too much information might push her to the limit.

"What about you?" she asked, looking at the man with sympathy.

The thin man shook his head regretfully. "There's no more hope for me. I am in too deep."

"No, don't say that. It's never too late to change." she said kindly to the retreating figure. He paused for a while to consider it but went on his way without acknowledging her comment.

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Ginny immediately rushed to the side of the unconscious figure after Wormtail left. She tried to be as calm as possible as she stared at his hollow cheeks, deathly-white complexion, dirty clothes and chapped lips. How could they possibly get out of there alive when her knight in shining armour had obviously fallen?

Sensing her presence, the pale figure slowly opened his eyes and took in the glistening tears on her cheeks. Ignoring the scorching pain on his legs and arms, he positioned his back against the wall and cradled the weeping figure tenderly.

"What's wrong, love?" he asked, wondering why she was there.

"Oh, Draco! I have been so foolish!" cried Ginny and he hugged her some more to comfort her.

"Aren't we all?" said Draco.

"No, you don't understand!" exclaimed Ginny and she filled him with the recent events that followed his disappearance pausing only when she came to the part that effected Harry's incarceration.

"Love, you don't have to tell me everything if you don't want to...and to be quite frank, I'm not sure if I really want to hear it all." said Draco in understanding.

"You have to know...it would be better this way...no secrets." Draco nodded solemnly and braced himself for whatever she had to say.

"V-voldemort ordered me to seduce Harr-----"

"WHAT??????" exploded Draco in a jealous rage. He was very much conscious of the fact that Ginny had been in love with Harry for years and who could blame her -- Harry was the wonder boy and he was the bad guy. It pained him to imagine Ginny being intimate with another guy and now she was telling him that she was ordered to do it with no less than Potter himself. Merlin! There was only so much a man could take. "That does it. I don't think I want to hear the details anymore."

"Please, Draco. Nothing happened. He fell asleep. It would just be better if you hear it from me first." she said tearfully.

"Go on then." said Draco, resigning himself to more shocking discoveries.

"Then your father used the polyjuice potion to impersonate him." she shot one apprehensive look at Draco before she continued. "Then....he pretended to molest me at the Gryffindor common room to ruin Harry's reputation and make everyone believe that he had turned dark."

"I'm sure my perverted father enjoyed that." said Draco with a nasty scowl. "But it still doesn't explain why you had to be punished."

Ginny closed her eyes and sighed deeply. This was the hardest part and she was not sure how he would take it. "Well, it turned out that your um-father was not pretending anymore." She felt Draco's body tense at her statement but did not comment. "He ripped my clothes and he....."

"No, Ginny, you don't have to continue. I know. I saw him do it several times before. He forced me to watch." said Draco in a tone so cold that it sent shivers down her spine.

"But he ----"

"I SAID STOP!" Ginny trembled in fear and started to back away from

him but Draco held her tight. "I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to scare you." Ginny hesitantly looked up and was startled to see tears flowing silently down his cheeks. "Why do I have a father like him? Why can't I lead a normal life?" he murmured desperately to himself. "You know what? When they put me here, I was hoping against hope that Potter would come and rescue you again. At least you would be safe in their hands. Then Wormtail told me what happened at the Ministry and I felt instantly relieved. You're with people who loves you and eventually, you would learn to forget me. I know you're too good for me that's why I had to let you go. But now that you're here with me, I'm ashamed to say that I'm being pretty selfish at the moment. I don't want to let you go."

"And I'm feeling that way, too." said Ginny, caressing his cheeks affectionately, easing his worries away.

"I know. That's what's tearing me inside. This is not the kind of life I have envisioned for us. I want to give you a nice car, comfortable home where we can live happily with our children - a life without fear. But it seems that our relationship is doomed from the very start." he said dejectedly.

"Please don't lose hope. We'll be able to escape somehow. Wormtail will help us and maybe we can save Harry too." said Ginny earnestly and Draco reluctantly nodded in agreement. "...and to set things straight, I want you to know that your father did not succeed. That's why I'm here now --- as punishment for defying him."

"Then this means that we have to be extra careful. My father would never stop until he finally gets what he wants." said Draco ominously. "And I swear I would kill him if he touches you again."

"You can't do that." said Ginny despairingly.

"And why not?"

"You don't have a wand."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I learned a few things about muggle dueling from your beloved brothers . I could crush him with my bare

hands. Like this." replied Draco and made a violent gesture with his hands. Ginny smiled wistfully as the action triggered some happy memories she had with her brothers.

"You miss them, don't you?" asked Draco upon seeing her expression.

"Yes." she replied simply. There was no point in lying.

"If we ever get out of here alive, I promise I won't pick on your brothers too much, even Potter and the Mud--oops Granger." said Draco and the familiar grin lit his face for a moment.

"Then I suggest you practice now because I do not intend to perish in this disgusting place." said Ginny with renewed optimism.

"That's the spirit! But there's one other thing that I must practice on."

said Draco and he winked suggestively at her.

"What?" asked Ginny, feigning ignorance.

"This." Then he bent over and kissed Ginny passionately.

Chapter 5 - Making a Stand

Meanwhile, at the first Order Meeting since Voldemort's so-called defeat, the members including Ron, Hermione and Neville were huddled together at the Headmistress' office, anxiously waiting for the meeting to start. They were just waiting for the Minister who still had to attend to some last minute reports. When he arrived however, all were alarmed to see him so distressed while clutching a bunch of papers in his right hand. He carefully avoided the questioning stares headed his way and refused to say anything. He just signaled the Headmistress to begin. After a couple of deep breathes and lots of biscuits, Professor McGonagall spoke with a heavy heart.

"Early this morning, a very strange incident occurred at the Gryffindor common room." She glanced around and noticing the puzzled look of some members, she forced herself to elaborate. "Apparently, Mr. Potter attempted to molest Miss Weasley and he would have succeeded if the other students did not come on time."

"Potter?" asked Moody with narrow eyes.

"Yes." replied McGonagall solemnly. "We used the veritaserum and we believed at first that it was really him but now we're not so sure. Then later, he attacked Snape to escape before the minister could arrive. The situation is very serious and if the others found out it would surely wreak havoc to the wizarding world. Many people look up to Harry. I'm afraid of how they would react if this ever comes out." She seemed to be in the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Harry? Attack Snape? That's impossible!" exclaimed Tonks in disbelief.

"Actually, it's not. The boy hates me and I bet he's been wanting to do that for a long time." said Snape but ironically, he seemed concerned.

"Innocent until proven guilty, that's what Dumbledore would say." said Lupin and stared at Snape directly in the eye. Snape was the first to look away.

"There's one thing bothering me, though. How could he have two

wands with him? Arthur, do you have any records to show that Harry bought another wand?" Professor McGonagall asked the minister curiously.

"No." The minister replied with a stony expression.

"But, Professor, I just realized that Harry doesn't need any wand. He could do wandless magic." said Hermione suddenly and she felt Ron stirred slightly at this piece of information. There was a loud muttering after this.

"And he could pass anti-apparation barriers. He doesn't need to attack Snape to escape." added Neville, feeling proud that he thought of it. The muttering increased as each gave his or her opinion on the matter simultaneously.

"If we had been tricked before by someone impersonating Moody, then someone could have been doing the same thing with Potter." suggested Hestia Jones wisely. "The only question now is who's doing it and why?" The others politely nodded in agreement.

"All right, then. We had established the fact that Harry could be innocent. So what shall we do now?" said Professor McGonagall and looked at each of them for any smart suggestions.

"If our assumptions are correct, then whoever planned this thing is a very cunning wizard indeed. Therefore, I think it would serve everyone's best interests if we keep this matter to ourselves first...until further development, that is." said Snape with the usual craftiness of a Slytherin Head.

Mr. Weasley stood up hastily and enlarged the documents he was holding so that everyone could read its contents. "I'm afraid that it has already developed." No one spoke for a while as they all stared in shock at the reports in front of them.

"Arthur! T-this is --- " Molly Weasley clamped her mouth with one hand in desperation, finding it hard to complete her sentence.

"I know. I couldn't believe it either. Harry, or rather the Bogus Harry,

had murdered hundreds of people this afternoon - in cold blood. These reports are the reason why I was late." stated Mr. Weasley evenly.

"T-then we can't stop the news from appearing on the papers tomorrow?" ventured McGonagall.

"No, curtailing press freedom could be very hazardous too." replied the minister with growing apprehension.

The Order members looked at one another uneasily while the three students continued to analyze the reports.

"Erm..Dad, there's something awfully weird with these...According to the eyewitnesses, Harry attacked alone -- shouldn't he have ordered the dementors to help him?" said Ron, speaking his mind for the first time.

"That....is an excellent observation, Mr. Weasley. Ten points for Gryffindor." said Snape but they could not tell from his tone if he was mocking or commending the boy.

"Someone is obviously putting an effort to ruin Potter's reputation for a reason that we don't know yet. If we cannot stop the news, then the next best thing is to go with the flow. Let's us pretend to believe that Harry turned dark and let's see where it will lead us." said Moody after carefully considering the situation. Everyone agreed at once.

"That's settled then. To the next agenda -- where's Ginny?" the headmistress looked inquiringly at the three teenagers who were now whispering anxiously with one another.

"S-She's not here, Professor." The three said in unison and reluctantly showed her the Marauders Map.

"WHAT?!?" exclaimed Mrs. Weasley then she fainted unceremoniously on the ground..

The meeting ended shortly afterwards but at least everyone seemed convinced of Harry's innocence though Moody still reiterated the

need for 'constant vigilance.' They had decided to play it by ear for now since no one could present other helpful insights.

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The following day, Ron, Hermione and Neville were surprised to find all the DA members, with the exception of Luna, Harry and Ginny of course, impatiently waiting for them at the Gryffindor common room.

"What are you doing here?" asked Ron although he already knew why.

"Because of this, mate. Now, tell us what's wrong." said Lee seriously as he handed them the latest copy of varied newspapers.

"Err ...umm---" he began but was rudely interrupted by an irritating voice.

"I knew it! Harry's been so weird lately. Now, I know why." said Zacharias with a smirk.

"Shut up! Let him talk." snapped the usually jolly twins to him.

"Do you believe what's written there?" asked Hermione shrewdly to the new arrivals.

"Of course not! Harry would never do such a thing!" exclaimed Cho positively.

"Are you kidding? We never believed in the papers at all." said Fred indignantly.

"Yeah, we prefer to hear it from the source." added George with the same incredulous expression.

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed another.

Hermione leaned at Ron for support. "What if we tell you that aside from what you've read, Harry tried to rape Ginny yesterday and

escaped after attacking Snape? What would you think then?" A deafening silence filled the room.

"Well, actually, we do not know for sure yet but we think that someone was impersonating him. I mean -- that's the only logical reason, isn't it?" said Neville calmly.

"Is it? I-I guess I'm not so sure." said Parvati hesitantly.

"Me, too. But Harry is not like that, is he?" said Padma, staring down at her shoes as she did so.

"Clearly, too much solitude and hanging out with Loony unhinged his brain." commented Zacharias sarcastically but no one reacted to his taunt.

"Ron?" The twins, unsure of what to say, turned to their youngest brother in bewilderment.

"Harry was the one who risked his life to prevent Voldemort from getting the Sorcerer's Stone. He saved my sister from his evil clutches, killing a dangerous basilisk in the process. He spared the life of the person who betrayed his parents when he could have had his revenge. And most importantly, he gave us hope when everything was at its worst. If those are not enough to convince you of Harry's innocence, then I pity you." Ron spoke in a hushed tone but everyone was hanging on to his words. "I chose to believe that Harry's not guilty. Had the situation been reversed, I believe he would do the same for me."

"Several times, Harry had been accused of lying but he was always proven innocent in the end. I have no reason to suspect that this case would be different." said Neville with such vehemence that astounded the others.

"But what about the attacks? Many eyewitnesses attested to the fact that it was really him." said Zacharias in confusion.

"No, those are mere illusions." said Hermione defiantly.

"You know this whole thing is laughable. I'm sure dad would set things straight soon." said Fred confidently.

"Hmmm...." began Hermione, trying to discern if it would be wise for them to know what the Order had decided. "Moody told us to go along for now and see where this will lead us. But he also said we have to keep an ear and eye out for clues. If their theories are correct, then a new dark lord could be emerging and using Harry to divide the wizarding community."

"So, are you saying that we have to pretend that we really believe the news?!?" said George incredulously as if he found the idea ridiculous. "What if Harry found out? He'd be mad for sure!"

"Then we'll simply explain. Listen, as of now we don't know what's going on yet so until we discover something, let's go along with the flow but we don't need to announce it to the whole world. A dignified silence will do." said Hermione patiently.

This time no one commented.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'll be writing about Harry's situation and Luna's Recovery next. Please remember to review

Chapter 6 - Not Just a Dream

After the other DA members had left, the three searched the castle once more for any proof of Ginny's whereabouts and procured some books from the Restricted Area which they forgot to explore earlier in their disoriented state. The next day, feeling oddly tired and spent, they made their way half-heartedly to the Great Hall to have their breakfast. It had only been four days since the term had ended and yet it felt like years.

"I honestly thought this was going to be our best vacation ever..." spoke Ron heavily as if the mere effort of speaking drained him of energy.

"Yeah - with Voldemort gone, I had hoped that we could finally get together without the fear of being attacked." agreed Neville. "A party would be nice, I guess, but just hanging out without worrying about dark wizards would be pleasant enough."

"Sometimes, it's really difficult to be friends with Harry. Things always happen to him and we always get involved somehow." said Ron thoughtfully. "The only difference is that we usually do it with him but now, we don't even know where he is or if he's still alive..."

"Now, don't say that Ron..." said Hermione reproachfully and bent her bushy-haired head to continue perusing a book they had acquired the night before. It was really depressing to hear someone say it out loud. It made the whole thing seem more real. But Ron went on as if he had not heard her or if he had, he just chose to ignore her.

"Then, there's the thing with Ginny. Foolish girl, I don't know what came to her - leaving the castle like that, without so much as a note to inform us if she's safe!" He paused for a while to pour himself a drink. "She really scares me sometimes. First, that thing with that Malfoy git and now, this." He had a far away look on his face, then he shook his head slightly as if he was dismissing a negative thought.

"Hey! Look who just arrived." exclaimed Neville suddenly, jerking Ron back from his momentary stupor and startling Hermione into

slamming the book shut in surprise. Her eyes immediately widened with bewilderment as she identified the approaching figures.

"Why are you all here again? I thought we all agreed to hunt for clues? We can't gather much information if we're all here." said Hermione in mild annoyance as she saw the former DA members drew near.

"Well, we just found out the hard way that the business atmosphere now is far from accommodating. We decided to close the shop until this whole ridiculous scam is over. People refused to buy our stuff now just because we're friends with Harry and some had already resorted to vandalizing our premises." admitted Fred ruefully.

"The fools seem to think that we had an evil conspiracy with Harry and that our products are basically dark objects in disguise. They didn't mind before though but now....I don't know. People are really gullible sometimes." said George with the same dejected tone.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and eyed Cho and Lee quizzically, not realizing that she presented a very uncanny picture of the stern Headmistress.

"I came here because I have nothing better to do at home and besides, Cho's coming too so I decided to go with her." said Lee sheepishly.

"And I came here for Luna. There's something that I need to discuss with her...if she's okay now, that is." said Cho calmly.

"About Harry?" asked Ron curiously.

"No, about Ginny." replied Cho and decided to change the topic before he could ask any more questions. "Have you found anything useful?" she turned to Hermione.

"Not yet. But maybe you could help us. There's a bunch of books upstairs that we need to explore and it's very time-consuming." she replied. Then she added in a mock undertone. "And of course, knowing Ron and Neville, I reckoned it would be best if I just do the

reading myself. Think you're up to it? The books are huge and it would probably take me forever to read it all."

Cho stifled a giggle at that but managed to nod her head solemnly in assent.

"We heard that!" exclaimed Neville and Ron indignantly but the girls just ignored them.

"By the way, has Professor McGonagall permitted you to stay here?" asked Hermione after a while.

The twins immediately shot surreptitious looks with each other while Cho and Lee looked blankly at her. Obviously, they had not thought about it.

"Well, I suppose you could ask her now. It would be highly impolite if you just stay here without informing her." suggested Neville helpfully, seeing their discomfort.

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Mister Longbottom. I heard everything and I'm allowing them to stay as long as necessary. You could all stay at Gryffindor Dormitory." They were all surprised to see the Headmistress appear behind them. "Oh, I forgot to mention something. Madam Pomfrey requested for a few days of rest so Miss Lovegood shall be staying with you as well. I trust you know what and what-not to say around her. I don't want her to have a relapse now that she's making so much progress." The headmistress said and turned to leave.

"I hate it when they do that!" said Fred when the headmistress was gone.

"What?" asked Ron. "Always telling us what to do like we're a bunch of stupid kids?"

"No - just appearing out of nowhere. She's just like Dumbledore. Caught us unaware several times before with that stunt." said George.

"What were you doing then?" asked Hermione curiously.

"Must you ask?" said both Fred and George with a grimace.

"Trust me, Hermione, you wouldn't wish to know." said Lee in amusement and gave her a knowing look.

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The seven teenagers awkwardly looked on as the Headmistress led a nervous Luna inside the dormitory. For practicality's sake, all the girls had to stay in one room and the boys at another. There was no problem with that arrangement. However, they were still ill at ease at having Luna there since her presence would hamper them from discussing anything related to their present predicament and excluding her will make her feel unwanted.

"Um - Professor, are you sure it's alright with them?" queried Luna as she noticed their strange expressions. The Headmistress glared at the seven before replying.

"Of course, dear. Why would it not be?" She replied kindly and gave her a smile that was rarely seen by students, even those from her own house.

"Oh, okay!" said Luna, still appearing unconvinced but decided to let it pass. "Where's Harry?"

"Harry is on vacation, too. You'll see him soon, don't worry." replied Professor McGonagall and shot warning glances at the other teenagers who still had not spoken a single thing. "I'll be leaving you now. Take care of yourselves."

The awkward silence continued as they watched the Headmistress leave. It seemed that everyone was quite unsure of what to say with one another especially Cho who was currently staring at Luna with such intense concentration but couldn't seem to find the words to express herself. Even Fred and George had nothing funny to say to break the ice. The silence only ended when Luna self-consciously sat down and pre-occupied herself by writing something on a piece of

paper.

The boys immediately excused themselves and went back to their room while Hermione suddenly found it imperative to take a shower. Cho, still uncertain of what to do, stayed for a while, thinking that this was the perfect opportunity for them to discuss what she had in mind but she had not even uttered a word yet when Luna smiled weakly at her.

"It's okay, Cho. You don't have to stay just because we're from the same house. I can manage." said Luna before returning to what she was doing.

Cho felt her heart wrench with sympathy as she heard Luna say that. Poor girl! Always assuming that nobody wanted her around. If she only knew that she got the boy every girl was dreaming of, she would not feel so insecure. But she could not tell her yet...or could she? Before the tragic incident, they had already gotten along well and were the only ones to suspect Ginny of deception. She wanted to talk about it with someone who would understand and that someone was Luna. Unfortunately, pushing the issue now might be harmful to her. *'No, this is not yet the time for that'* She thought and she left quietly before she could change her mind.

Luna tried to push away the tears that threatened to fall as she watched Cho leave. She should have stayed in the hospital wing. At least there, she would not feel so hurt if anyone ignored her because nobody else was there aside from Madam Pomfrey who was always busy with her healing potions anyway. Her only visitor was Harry and she was contented with that. He made her laugh with his jokes. He told her funny stories about Hogwarts life...He taught her several magic tricks that she had not even imagined possible before...and most of all, he made her feel special and proud of herself. But he was away now and she was stuck in this dormitory where nobody even bothered to show her around. And they had been acting very odd...very odd indeed.

As she continued her musing, she noticed a newspaper peeking from behind the cover of the sofa on the opposite side. It looked as if it someone had shoved it there rather hastily. Feeling slightly amused

and curious at the same time, she pulled the paper and began to read the front page.

HARRY POTTER MURDERED A HUNDRED MUGGLES AT A PARTY IN LONDON!!!

HARRY POTTER GONE DARK TO AVENGE HIS GIRLFRIEND'S FATE!!!

HARRY POTTER -- THE NEXT DARK LORD???

With trembling hands, she forced herself to read the articles underneath the shocking headlines but the tears flooded her vision before she could even finish the first paragraph. "NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!"

'This cannot be true!' She thought to herself then her head throbbed painfully as she attempted to process the information she had just discovered. *'So, this is why everyone's acting so weird. But this can't be true...this can't be true...'* Then as the painful pounding on her head continued, several alarming images flashed dangerously in her mind. She saw her father screaming in anguish as Voldemort threw her to two death-eaters... She saw Voldemort disarm his opponents... Then, she witnessed as a death-eater shot the killing curse on her father... "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!! FATHER!!!!" She struggled to stay conscious but the pain was unbearable. The last thing she heard before her body succumbed to the excruciating sensation was the terrified yells of her current dorm mates.

"LUNA!" called Hermione but was shocked to find her unconscious form lying on the ground with one hand still clutching what looked like the previous day's newspaper. She carefully removed the paper from the girl's grasp to confirm her suspicion. "WHO LEFT THIS PIECE OF GARBAGE LYING AROUND?!?" she angrily asked the others, waving the offensive paper in front of them.

Ron shuffled his feet nervously as he stared from the paper to the sofa. "S-sorry, Herm. I was in a hurry...I guess I di---"

"-- YOU DIDN'T THINK - TYPICAL! HOW WE ENDED UP

TOGETHER IS STILL A PUZZLE TO ME!" said Hermione in exasperation then she carefully levitated Luna's body and placed her to a more comfortable place. "McGonagall will be livid. She hasn't even spent one night here and look what happens."

"What are we going to do now? Shall we inform the headmistress?" asked Neville timidly.

"Not right now. Let's wait until Luna comes around first then we'll take it from there." said Cho as she surveyed Luna's face. *'I should have stayed...'*

"I think that would be wise. We'll take turns at keeping an eye on her until she wakes up. Cho and I can take the first turn, Fred and George next, then Neville and Lee, then Ron. Ron will have no partner because this is his fault." said Hermione and pushed the boys away before they could voice out any objection.

"I feel terrible..." admitted Cho when the boys were finally out of sight.

"Me, too." said Hermione ruefully. "I should have checked the room but I guess it escaped my mind."

"But what's done is done. Let's just hope that Luna's alright when she wakes up." said Cho in resignation.

"I hope this accident triggers her memory back." said Hermione and they both fell silent as they watched the girl who had already suffered a lot. The first hour had passed...Luna was still unconscious....Second hour....No change at all and the two girls were already feeling their eyelids droop from fatigue and lethargy...Third hour....

"No, don't harm him anymore....please..." The two shot up at once and stared groggily at Luna.

"I guess she's dreaming about her father." whispered Cho, trying her best to stifle a yawn.

"Luna...Luna...wake up!" Hermione shook Luna's shoulders to jerk

her away from her nightmare.

"No.....please.....please....don't hurt him..." the girl pleaded and her body convulsed as if she was in terrible pain.

"Cho, you better get McGonagall now...I'll get the boys." said Hermione at once as Luna's cry was replaced by a howl of pain.

Within a few minutes, all were gathered around Luna while Professor McGonagall tried to locate the school nurse immediately.

"LUNA! LUNA! WAKE UP!!!!" They all shouted at once then feeling desperate, Hermione slapped Luna's left cheek forcefully.

"I saw it in a muggle movie once and it worked." she explained as the others stared at her in puzzlement. Amazingly, Luna started to flutter her eyelids slowly until she was able to pry them open. Neville quickly offered a glass of water which she gratefully accepted.

Then Luna glared accusingly at each of them. "Why didn't you tell me? And what is the meaning of those ridiculous articles?"

The others shifted their gaze uneasily. They had never witnessed Luna on an angry fit before and seeing it now made them extremely uncomfortable. She's almost like Harry when he's really upset about something.

"Luna, we wanted to tell you but Madam Pomfrey forbid us to do so. She said we had to let you heal on your own." said Cho in an apologetic tone.

"S-she also said that you might have a nervous breakdown or something...so we had to wait..." said Hermione.

"And what about the news? Haven't you bothered to correct them? That's really preposterous! Harry would never ever do those horrible things! Has the wizarding world conveniently forgot what he did for them? The sacrifices he made? How he almost died so that the others may live?" yelled Luna angrily, ignoring the others' attempt to calm her down.

"Luna, you're right. The news is rubbish. But there's a huge problem and the only thing that could help us right now is to pretend that we believe those stories." said Professor McGonagall who had just arrived along with Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey.

"Luna, drink this potion. It will help you calm down." said Madam Pomfrey as she examined her patient. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yes, thank you." replied Luna and turned her attention back to her housemates.

"We're sorry about what happened to your father, Luna. It must be really terrible." said Ron sympathetically. He could identify with her because he had almost lost his father at the ministry too.

Luna's expression softened immediately at the mention of her father. She remembered every unpleasant details of her life now. Her father joined Voldemort's army to ensure her safety but in the end, it had all been a lie. Voldemort never kept the promise that he would let her live if her father followed his commands. In the end, her father dropped all pretense and rushed to save his only child but he failed. He was killed mercilessly by one of Voldemort's loyal followers.

"By the way, I'm sorry if I hurt you. You were having a nightmare and we're already getting desperate so I slapped you." said Hermione.

"Nightmare?" Luna looked blank for a moment.

"Yeah...you were pleading for someone not to hurt your father." said Cho. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly fine, especially now that I can recall everything. But who said I'm dreaming about my father?" asked Luna anxiously.

Hermione and Cho looked at one another. "Well, actually, we just assumed that you were having a nightmare about him." said Hermione.

"No, I'm not. It's Harry. He's being tortured." said Luna

apprehensively and glanced back at the papers. "That's why those stories cannot be true. They've got him and we need to rescue him NOW."

"Harry?"

"Luna, you know it's just a dream...."

"No, it's not just a dream... I cannot explain it but it's like Harry was sending me a vision of what's happening to him..." said Luna desperately.

"Hey! Maybe it's just like Harry's vision when dad was bitten by a snake!" exclaimed Ron in astonishment.

"But Luna's not a seer!" countered another.

"And neither is Harry - but his vision had been accurate!" said Ron heatedly.

"MERLIN! DON'T YOU WISH TO KNOW WHO GOT HIM?!?" yelled Luna in frustration.

"Who got him?" asked everyone with great interest.

"Voldemort, of course. Who else?" answered Luna with much annoyance as if she thought that it was pretty obvious and that they were just wasting their time talking when Harry urgently needed to be rescued.

"V-Voldemort?" croaked the Headmistress nervously.

"But he's dead!" exclaimed Fred and George at once.

"No, he's not!" she insisted.

"You passed out...you didn't see everything. Harry was able to kill him." Lee argued once more.

"NO, HE DID NOT!"

"Miss Lovegood, please be reasonable. The nightmare is over. Harry defeated the Dark Lord last October." said Professor McGonagall, adopting her stern demeanor once more to settle the brewing dispute.

"NO, HE DID NOT!!! HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU?!? WE NEED TO GET TO HARRY BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!" screamed Luna vehemently. This time, the enormous glass jar on one corner of the room suddenly exploded into tiny pieces. Then Luna's pupils vanished and her eyes blazed white with fury, scaring the wits out of those who witnessed the shocking transformation.

"How do you know?" queried Professor Snape stonily as he glanced curiously at the shattered jar and at her glowing eyes.

"Because Harry said so..."

Chapter 7 - The Unholy Alliance (Part 1)

"....and unlike some people I know, I believe him."

The DA members looked nervously at one another. Harry had repeatedly said the same thing to them but they refused to believe him. They purposely closed their eyes to the possibility just because believing otherwise was so much simpler. But they should have known better. After all Harry was the only one who have fought with Voldemort directly before. He was the only one who could tell the difference.

The Headmistress seemed terribly unnerved by Luna's outburst and was not able to say anything so they looked helplessly upon the Potions Master to take charge of the situation.

"If you insist. Tell us what you saw and let's see if it's real." said Professor Snape evenly, his expression unfathomable as he contemplated silently on what he just saw. Luna had always been shy and reserved. It was very disconcerting to see her suddenly burst with power of such magnitude in a fit of anger....just like Harry.

The others waited patiently as Luna pacified herself before she shared her vision with them.

"It would be faster if you see it yourself." said Luna, then with astonishing speed and unbelievable magical release, she conjured a white sheet over the wall and closed her eyes in intense concentration. Unsure of what to expect, they just stared blankly on the white sheet and waited. Then to their amazement, images started to appear on the screen enabling them to clearly visualize Harry's condition.

"H-how ----" Ron began to ask but Professor Snape glared dangerously at him.

"Don't interrupt her!" he whispered angrily.

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Harry's hands were held tightly by two thick silver chains - the only things that were keeping him from falling into the roaring inferno four feet underneath his thin body. Around him were ten hooded figures moving about in a fluid motion while two others were mercilessly taking turns into whipping his already unconscious form. His clothes were torn from the lashes and blood was oozing from his wounds but his tormentors' lust for affliction seemed insatiable.

"Is he weak already?" asked a cold voice of a figure who had arrived to check on the captive's condition. The man had claw-like fingers and ruby eyes. It was Voldemort.

"Yes, Master. We have been doing this for an hour now even after he collapsed from the pain. I don't think he would be doing much magic now." declared one of the whippers proudly.

The dark lord cackled with delight at the news then he flicked his wand slightly at the captive. "ENERVATE!"

At the spell, Harry's eyes weakly opened but he did not seem surprised at seeing Voldemort in front of him. Nor did he appear terrified. In fact, if one would look closely, one would notice a hint of amusement there. Contrary to their assumption, he was not unconscious...He was merely pre-occupied with establishing a connection with his girlfriend so that at least one person would know the truth even if he failed to survive this latest encounter. "Hello, Tom."

"So you're obsessed with pleasantries now, Potter? Don't worry, I can play along." said the dark lord in mock amusement. "Hello, Harry. I'm 'pleased' to meet you."

"No, Tom. I am the one PLEASED to meet you." said Harry and was elated to notice a shadow of uncertainty cross Voldemort's face.

"What do you mean?" asked the evil wizard venomously.

"You mean you don't know?" Harry feigned ignorance and donned a

shocked look. "But your minions claimed that you were omnipotent and all-knowing...Oh, well, I guess everybody was entitled to his or her own opinion." Then he smiled widely at the dark lord.

Voldemort stared at the boy in confusion. He was not used to this abrupt change in Potter's attitude towards him. Whereas before, he could easily scare the boy, now it seemed that his long time enemy felt confident enough to scorn him despite of his obvious disadvantage. Maybe the boy was planning another surprise...yes, that must be it.

"Wormtail, bring the captives now!" he yelled instead, hoping to pull a few surprises of his own.

Within minutes, Wormtail arrived with Draco and Ginny and pushed them in front of Voldemort. But Harry still seemed unperturbed.

"What are you up to, Potter?" asked the dark lord coldly.

"Nothing. You were the one who was up to something. Faking your death like that...Merlin! You should be ashamed of yourself... really, imitating Wormtail of all people...tsk...tsk..tsk... I expected more from the DARK LORD." scoffed Harry, putting an emphasis on the 'LORD' part in the most sarcastic tone that he could manage. From his high position, he noticed a slight smirk on Draco's lips and he pondered whether it would be possible that Draco was not as bad as he thought. Maybe Luna was right...

"Yes, I faked my own death. Since I could not get hold of that ridiculous prophesy, I devised another way to find out how you plan to defeat me. Clever, am I not?" said Voldemort and his eerie laughter filled the room once again. "Now, I know your ultimate plan and I'm pleased to inform you that our brother wands won't have to duel with each other again."

"Why? You've forced Mr. Ollivander to make you another wand?" asked Harry nonchalantly. At the look of surprise on Voldemort's face, he added somewhat coolly. "You didn't think I'd figure it out, do you? Mind you, I knew about Bellatrix too. She was the person behind the mask and you put a spell on her voice and taught her enough

wandless magic to effect the deception. You just forgot one minor detail, though. Even if you were able to force Ollivander to add Fawkes' feather into her wand, it WAS still HER wand and I happen to know that SHE, NOT YOU, was the one who killed Sirius. You should have gone all out with your juvenile scheme and let her use your wand."

Voldemort was momentarily taken aback by this but he recovered rapidly. He gave him a mock applause. "Splendid! But you're wrong on one account. I happen to like my wand and it will stay that way, whereas yours was already.... broken into half....by your own headmistress." He said slowly to let the devastating news sink more painfully but if he was expecting Harry to look angry or sad, he was severely disappointed. Incensed by his lack of response, he levitated the days' newspaper so that the boy could read the bad news for himself.

"Well?" prompted Voldemort.

"Well what?" said Harry, his face blank.

"What do you think about those little headlines bearing your precious name? Were you shocked that the wizarding world don't see you as a hero now? Even your friends and former allies have deserted you now..." sneered Voldemort malevolently.

"Actually - No. It would take more than that to shock me now. So what do you plan to do after successfully ruining my reputation?" asked Harry with the same blank expression. "You'll threaten to kill me again?" he added disdainfully.

"Threaten? Not threaten, Potter. I'll kill you this time and without your annoying intrusion, I would be free to conquer the wizarding world once more." said Voldemort, his eyes glinting evilly at the prospect of finally being able to remove the most dangerous obstacle in his path.

"Oh please, don't tell me we're back to that again. Honestly, couldn't you come up with a better farewell speech? It loses its sting once heard too often." said Harry, the derision in his voice was unmistakeable.

"Is that so? Maybe it would be more entertaining if someone from your own house kills you instead." He motioned Ginny to come forward gave her a wand then he pointed his own wand at Draco. "Kill him now, child, or I'll kill the young Malfoy."

Harry glanced at the two captives and saw Ginny crying silently as she took the wand handed to her with a trembling hand. Draco mouthed a hasty apology to him and lowered his gaze in defeat to avoid witnessing the event. Harry immediately lost his concentration and the connection with Luna was instantly broken.

"It's okay, Ginny. Do what you must. I understand."

Voldemort became suddenly wary of his easy compliance and decided to hasten the process. "CRUCIO!" he sent the spell at Draco whose weakened body rapidly fell on the ground in pain. Then he turned to the girl impatiently. "DO IT NOW!"

"A-Ave-da K-Ke-dav....ra...." murmured Ginny tearfully and fell to the ground in remorse as she saw the green light struck Harry squarely on the chest. Sobbing hysterically, she now realized that she had indeed foolishly chosen the wrong side. She had just murdered one of her best friends -- the same person who saved her before. How could she? She was even worse than Voldemort!

Seeing her disconsolate state, Voldemort decided that two more commands would be enough. But he did not need to stay. After all, Harry was dead and there was no need for him to waste any more of his precious time.

"Wormtail, I'll leave you here to destroy the evidences. Drop the *bodies* into the fire." ordered Voldemort wickedly, then he turned to Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, due to your father's recent achievement, I'm willing to give you another chance to make up for your earlier disobedience. Dispose of the girl and you can come back to my good graces. You don't want to be a disappointment to your father, do you?"

Draco, whose face was still hidden, changed his expression to one of

aristocratic haughtiness before he faced the evil man. "Yes, My Lord. It would be a pleasure." He heard him inform Wormtail that they would be leaving. Maybe, now's their chance to escape...

"Excellent choice, Draco. Your father shall be pleased. We'll be expecting you at the Malfoy Manor soon." said Voldemort and ordered his other servants to disapparate with him.

When Voldemort and the other death-eaters were gone, Draco and Wormtail immediately dropped the pretense and hurried to Ginny's side.

"Ginny, I could erase your memory of this if you want." offered Wormtail but the girl shook her head vigorously.

"No, I want to remember every detail of where my foolishness had led me. I want to instill in my mind that I had just murdered one of the kindest person I know. If I have to go to Azkaban for that, I will." cried Ginny and continued to sob uncontrollably.

"This is all my fault." said Draco in agony and held the weeping figure in his arms.

"Draco, Ginny...that's enough...You must escape now. Don't waste time. Voldemort will get suspicious if I don't turn up at the Manor soon." said Wormtail nervously.

"No, you must come with us. We need your help. We don't know where to go." said Draco in desperation. "And we must take Potter's body with us. The least we could do is give him a proper burial."

Wormtail silently struggled with himself before coming up with a decision. Voldemort would kill him anyway if he found out that he let the two escape. "Alright, I'll come with you." He unlocked the chains on Harry's hands and levitated him carefully to the ground. Then, he took out the portkey that he had prepared earlier in the hope that the opportunity to flee would come up. Within seconds, the four were transported to a place that only Wormtail had any knowledge of.

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The onlookers panicked slightly when the images on the screen disappeared. The last scene they witnessed was that of Voldemort forcing Ginny to slay Harry and using Draco as the instrument to ensure her compliance.

"What happened?" asked Snape, deeply disturbed by the scene. It was very real and the possibility of Harry's survival was almost non-existent.

"The connection was broken even before you woke me up. Harry must have broken it off or something ... I'm not sure what it meant..." replied Luna miserably.

"So what are we going to do now?" asked Fred.

"I don't know."

"Severus, did you recognize the place?" asked the stunned Headmistress.

"Unfortunately not." said Snape with uncharacteristic sadness in his voice.

"Then, I guess we have no way to locate them unless H-harry survived and decided to communicate with Luna again." said Hermione, feeling guilty that they had not taken Harry's warning seriously before.

"Sorry, but I don't think I could forgive you and your sister if she went through with it." said Luna truthfully at Ginny's brothers. "Cho and I already suspected her before but your emotions got in the way."

Ron, Fred and George sadly lowered their heads in shame. What Luna had said was true. If they had not been too stubborn, then they would have found out sooner what Ginny was up to and they would have been in the position to help her return to the right path. They protected her too much...and now, all of them were paying the price. This was war, and in war, ties among friends and families were

usually not as strong as the bonds of choice.

Cho looked from the Weasley brothers and the irate Luna and decided that it was time to steer the discussion to a safer topic. "Luna, I was thinking... Can you also communicate with Harry through that mind projection thing?"

"I don't know. I haven't tried it yet." said Luna then furrowed her brow once more in concentration.

"Then maybe you should try." said Cho hopefully.

"I just did but there was no response." said Luna in defeat.

"Well, at least we were able to unravel part of the mystery." said Hermione to cheer everyone up. "Now, we know Voldemort's still around and that he designed a most elaborate plot to divide and conquer the wizarding world and to eliminate his enemy in the worst way possible."

"You consider THAT a good thing?" said Lee in confusion.

"Yes. It is better than not knowing anything at all." agreed Cho.

"By the way, how did you learn to do that?" asked Neville in wonder, pointing at the make-shift screen.

"Harry taught me. I also wondered why he was exerting so much effort into teaching me but now I understand completely. You did not believe him and the DA lost its purpose. But he knew that this is going to happen so he decided to share what he knew with me and we spent most of the time practicing spells. He prepared me for the worst." replied Luna in a cold voice that they had not heard before. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to rest."

"Luna..." called Snape when she was halfway up the stairs.

"What?"

"Nothing." replied Snape after a moment's hesitation but Luna nodded as if she was able to read the silent question in his mind.

Chapter 8 - The Unholy Alliance (Part 2)

"Ouch! Wormtail, couldn't you have prepared a softer landing spot for us?" complained Draco as they fell on a heap on a marble flooring.

"Oops, sorry. But I was in a hurry." said Wormtail defensively.

"Aahhhh!!!" They heard Ginny yell in fright. They immediately brought their wands out.

"What's the problem?"

"N-nothing. Harry's body just fell on top of me. It was disgusting!" said Ginny tearfully as she scrambled away from the corpse, looking highly embarrassed and scared at the same time. No one noticed the slight twitching of Harry's lips.

"By the way, where the hell are we?" asked Draco after ensuring that Ginny's okay.

"Godric's Hollow - Potter's old house." replied Wormtail.

"WE ARE AT POTTER'S HOUSE!!!" exclaimed Ginny and Draco, clearly unnerved by the revelation.

"Don't overreact. I just thought that this is the last place they would expect to find us...and with certain circumstances...I guess it would be fitting to return Harry's body to where it really belonged." said Wormtail sadly in recollection of his own treachery.

As expected, no one bothered to look at Harry's reaction at the mention of his house but of course, what person in his right state of mind would check for a corpse's reaction? However, had they taken the time to give him even the merest of a glance, they would have noticed his partially covered eyes scanning the room with great interest.

"Harry's parents and he would probably haunt us here forever..." said Ginny nervously.

'Oh, what a brilliant idea! Thanks, Ginny.' thought Harry in amusement. Then trying not to move his hands too much, he caused the furnitures on the room rearrange itself...Afterwards, he levitated his parents' portrait and halted it directly in front of the three.

"Wormtail, I told you so...we had to get out of here fast before it's too late..." cried Ginny but Wormtail was not listening. He knelt on the ground and apologized profusely to his former best friends.

"I'm really sorry for betraying you....Lily..James...Heaven knows I've suffered enough...and your son... He gave me the chance but I let the opportunity slip on my fingers...I was a coward...take me if it could appease your anger...but let the children go... They're still young... They can still change their ways..." said Wormtail remorsefully then he began to punch himself hard for every crime he committed under Voldemort's power.

Draco and Ginny were hugging each other for support as they watched upon Wormtail's act of repentance. It would have been funny if the situation had not been that serious but right now, it looked so creepy.

"M-Mr. and Mrs. Potter, I'm sorry too for making your son's life miserable at Hogwarts.." said Draco in the same penitent tone.

"It's my fault, too. If I had not chosen to follow Voldemort, he would still be alive today... I have been foolish... but that reason is unacceptable... You can punish me...and if that punishment would be death...then so be it." said Ginny as she continued to cry in anguish.

Harry heard their confessions and attempts at an apology but he was not quite finished yet. With another wave of his hand, he moved the portraits out of the way and projected the scene of his parents' death on the wall. Then he levitated himself high up and called their attention.

"YOU, TRAITORS! WHY HAVE YOU DECIDED TO JOIN THE EVIL SIDE?" his booming voice echoed around the house and the three terrified creatures faced what they thought was a zombie Harry with

exceedingly contrite expressions.

"H-harry?" whispered Ginny as her eyes widened in fear.

"No enough reason to justify our actions - it was just plain lust for power and blindness to the truth." stated Draco bravely and resigned himself to his fate.

"WHAT ABOUT YOU, PETER?" his escalated body glowed dangerously as he impatiently waited for his reply.

"I have been stupid....absolutely stupid...If you can find it in your heart to forgive me then I'd be willing to die peacefully in your hands." said Wormtail and he, too, resigned himself to what lay ahead.

"HOW CAN I BE SURE THAT YOU WON'T BETRAY THE LIGHT SIDE AGAIN?" demanded Harry. The three looked up expectantly. It seemed like they were not going to die today after all.

"You're ghost could watch our actions everyday, and if you see us straying again from the path of goodness, then it's your decision to make." replied Wormtail and the other two nodded in agreement.

"Very well, I'll hold on to your words for now." said Harry then feeling the effect of excessive use of power added to the pain he had to endure before, he closed his eyes and was unable to control himself from falling on top of Ginny once more.

"AHHHHH!!!!!!!" screamed Ginny and forced his body away from her. Harry weakly stood up and gave Ginny a mischievous smile.

"Hey, what's wrong? You didn't seem to mind that when we were at the common room." he drawled and gave Draco a half-smile.

Ginny immediately turned scarlet at the reference of her foolishness then as if something just occurred to her, she tentatively touched Harry's cheek. It was warm.

"Y-you're alive?" she asked as if she couldn't believe it was possible.

Draco and Wormtail reluctantly touched his cheek too.

"Y-you're alive!" They both exclaimed incredulously.

"Yeah - that would explain the breathing..." said Harry sarcastically.

"B-but how? We all saw it happen!" Their sighs of relief was unmistakeable.

"Let me show you what really transpired." said Harry then summoning what was left of his strength, he projected his own death scene on the wall in slow motion and the three watched the event carefully.

As Ginny was about to shoot the killing curse on Harry, a drop of tear fell upon the wand and instead of the expected green light, a white beam escaped from its tip instead. Then mere inches after it left the wand, Harry waved his imprisoned hand slightly and the white beam was transformed into a green one.

"That, my friends, is one of the wonders of magic. As what Bellatrix, your former ally, had told me, the words are not enough....you need to really *mean* it...you have to take intense pleasure in inflicting pain and in my case -- death. You were not meant to be a murderer, Ginny and I'm glad of that fact." said Harry as he halted the demonstration.

"You called us 'friends'?" croaked Wormtail in disbelief.

"Yes, why not? You did not leave my body to rot in that wretched place - that in itself was remarkable enough. Then I heard your apologies earlier and the promise to change. I am not a God but I'm willing to forgive you because I know that it is the right to do." explained Harry.

"Oh, I'm really sorry, Harry. Thank you for being so kind." said Ginny and she kissed him lightly on the cheek in gratitude. Draco did not look too pleased with it, though, but he did not say anything.

"Never mind that. After what I've just shown you, do you still believe that you could have taken me that easily?" said Harry sardonically.

"No, I suppose not. Actually, I wondered about that but I had assumed that the potion was very effective." admitted Ginny.

"It was not that potent for me. If you could remember correctly, I stayed conscious long enough to interrogate you then I allowed myself to 'pass out' so that you could bring me to wherever your master was. To be honest, Voldemort's eerie silence had been bugging me for months and I wanted to meet him soon to end my agony. I have to admit that your little charade was very timely..." said Harry then he gave another taunting grin at Draco. "...and besides, I enjoyed the show...immensely!" He laughed out loud at the sight of Draco's reddened face and tensed expression.

"You're sick, Potter." spat Draco angrily.

"Hey, chill out! I'm just joking! I have a very adorable girlfriend waiting for me you know." said Harry and smiled as he thought about Luna. *'wonder how she's doing now...Maybe I can visit her later...'*

"Fine. We can drop that. Anyway, if you're so powerful how come you did not use the killing curse then? You had the perfect opportunity." said Draco.

"I wish I could. I have the ability but unfortunately, I don't have the intent. Not to mention the fact that if I had indeed finished him off, I would be forever wondering about your loyalties. No, I have other plans for Voldemort and I am not just after him ...I want ALL of his devoted supporters and slaves, too. " replied Harry and after a while he added. "Consider yourselves very fortunate that I have decided to spare you."

The three looked at one another and instantly made a resolution not to be swayed by evil temptation again. Harry did not need to elaborate. The heavy threat underlying his cool words was enough.

"I have to go somewhere." said Wormtail uneasily after a while.

"Where are you going?" asked Draco warily.

"I need to get help. We can't stay here forever...we need some place

more secure and I know of only one person who could help us." replied Wormtail and waited for Harry's approval.

Harry held his arm where the dark mark was located. A few minutes of excruciating pain followed then Harry waved him off. "Go on but don't take too long."

Wormtail stared at his arm in amazement. The dark mark was gone. Forcing back the lump on his throat, he disappeared silently.

"You trust him?" asked Ginny in wonder after he left.

"I'm trying." replied Harry casually.

"How did you learn all those stuff?" asked Draco curiously, a little confident now that he was certain that Harry was not on a vengeful streak.

"That....is something that I do not wish to divulge as of this moment. Don't forget, you're still under probation. I may be forgiving...but I am definitely not stupid." declared Harry in a cold voice that implied a harsh end for them if they ever betray him once more.

With nothing better to do, Harry wandered around the house with Draco while Ginny prepared some food for them including whoever Wormtail was going to bring with him.

"Your house is not that bad, Potter." said Draco in admiration as they viewed the marvelous collection of books at the mini-library, the wide array of magical objects and all other details that depicted the Potter fortune so lavishly.

"For once, I agree with you." grinned Harry.

"Wanna play wizard chess?"

"No, thanks...It's outside my field of expertise. Ron's the best at that game." said Harry and smiled at Draco's look of disbelief.

"I didn't think Weasley was ever good at anything." said Draco then

clamped one hand at his mouth, afraid that he had offended Harry.

"You'd be surprised. Ron's good at a lot of things...and he's very brave too. You know during our first year, Ron beat McGonagall's chess set and he urged us to go on even if he was already injured. Then on our second year, we had to go to the dark forest to follow the spiders. Ron has a phobia with those creatures but he still came with me...amazing!" said Harry, smiling as he recalled his adventures with his best friend.

"Why are you telling me these, Harry?" asked Draco in confusion, not realizing that he had just referred to his former school enemy by his first name. Harry raised one eyebrow before he replied.

"Because you're my friend now and I'm treating you as how I usually treat my friends."

"Oh, okay. Then, I suppose you're going to call me 'Draco' now." said Draco awkwardly. It was weird being friends with Potter but it was surely better than nothing.

"Of course, Draco. I think we better come down. I have a feeling that Wormtail would be back soon." said Harry.

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"Snape?" Harry and Draco stared incredulously at the Slytherin Head and at Wormtail who was twitching on his seat nervously.

"I see Peter was telling the truth when he told me that you were here, Potter." said Snape and gave everyone a smile.

Harry was dumbfounded. Snape? Smiled? And at him, too. This was weird but he decided to play it cool. "So, Peter, what help could he possibly give us?"

"Snape was one of the most cunning spies of Voldemort before his defection. He could provide us with informations on places where Voldemort would not be able to find us so easily and being free to interact with other wizards, he could also supply us with essential

details regarding Voldemort's activities." said Wormtail nervously.

To everyone's amazement, Harry gave a soft chuckle at first, then a slight laugh until finally he couldn't control his hilarity anymore. He rolled with laughter as if someone was tickling his ribs and the onlookers were already suspecting that someone had sent a tickling charm on him.

"Sorry...I just found it rather comical for all of us to bond together like this. This is plainly --- " Harry struggled to find the appropriate description.

"Strange...?" said Ginny. Harry shook his head.

"Odd...?" said Draco but Harry did not find it fitting.

"I was thinking more along the lines of annoying...and disturbing.." said Harry.

"Unholy...." suggested Snape helpfully and Harry's smiled widened.

"Yeah, that's it! UNHOLY ALLIANCE --- I never imagined the time would come when all of us would fight on the same side. Really weird!" said Harry then he turned to Snape. "So, how's school? Is everyone still thinking I'm the next dark lord?"

"No, the DA and Order members believe someone was just impersonating you but we've been pretending that we believe in the stories. Also, Luna has made an amazing recovery." reported Snape.

"Oh, I'm so glad about that. Did she tell you about what happened?"

"No."

Harry's face fell.

"Luna did not TELL us....she SHOWED us."

"She did? That's even better!"

"Yes and it was very enlightening. Where did you learn to do that, Potter?" asked Snape curiously.

"What - the sarcasm? From you, of course." replied Harry dismissively. "So, if this place gets too hot, where else can we hide?"

"Well, you can either choose between Snape Mansion and Dumbledore Palace." replied Snape.

"Dumbledore has a palace?" asked Ginny with much interest.

"I'm rather partial to grandeur myself. I think I prefer Dumbledore's Palace." said Draco enthusiastically.

"Unfortunately for you, pal. I'm choosing Snape Mansion and that's where we are going next." replied Harry and was amused to see the disappointment on the faces of the other two teenagers. However, his decision was not mainly to annoy the them. He wanted to get to know Snape better and a hint of a smile showed that his previous professor was pleased by his choice.

"I would prepare the house and I'll inform you as soon as it is necessary for you to go there." said Snape cheerfully, ignoring the annoyed whispers of Draco and Ginny.

"Thank you, Professor." said Harry. Then adopting a serious tone, he beckoned to Snape and whispered a request. "Listen. Voldemort will soon declare that I'm dead so you better pretend to believe it too. And don't tell anyone that you have seen me. I'm planning a little surprise for everyone. When certain people begin to disappear, offer to look for them. You will act as if you're really exerting an effort into finding them but you're going to come up with nothing. Will you do that?"

"As long as you're on the light side." agreed Snape conditionally.

"Don't worry. I am and always will be." said Harry, appreciating his cautiousness.

Chapter 9 - Polite Discussion

"You've changed..." observed Snape casually.

"Really? Not the attention-seeking-good-for-nothing-son-of-James-Potter anymore?" queried Harry in a mocking tone. He was surprised when the usually snide professor did not deduct points from his house for his 'disrespectful' attitude.

"What happened to you, Potter?" asked the Professor curiously, for once ignoring his angsty behaviour.

"So we're back to our normal term of endearment. That's a relief! I don't think it would be good for my sanity if we become chummy all of a sudden." said Harry, shuddering slightly for effect. "Well, to answer your question, I've realized that people now find it terribly difficult to believe my stories...I miss the times when Dumbledore only had to say that he believes me and then everyone else will follow." Snape raised one dark eyebrow at that. "... -- most of the people that matters at least -- but since the so-called defeat of Voldemort, people tend to be blind. Maybe it's because they prefer to believe that the evil had passed and that our world is normal again."

"What's your plan then?" said Snape.

"Yeah, we want to hear it, too." said Draco who went closer to join their conversation. Wormtail and Ginny also looked at him expectantly.

Harry groaned at having to go over his plans with them. He still had to adjust to this unexpected truce. Unfortunately, he had to trust them with it in order for his plan to work. "All right, the plan is simple actually. We'll just let Voldemort go on with his plan --"

"What!!! That's the brilliant plan you've been talking about?" exclaimed Draco incredulously.

"Err...not exactly." said Harry somewhat sheepishly.

"You said something about disappearance of some people..."

prodded Snape while placing one strong hand on Draco's mouth to refrain him from sputtering other nonsensical garbage.

"I was planning on asking Hermione's help into finding other ways to eliminate the enemies then of course, I also want Luna with me... then train the others until it's time..." The others looked dubiously at him. Harry threw up his hands in defeat. "Okay, fine. I admit the plan is not perfect yet. I'm counting on your knowledge of the dark arts and Voldemort himself to polish it if you're up to the challenge." said Harry, disgruntled. For a second, he seemed like his old self again -- unassuming and vulnerable -- and clearly, he was not pleased with it. He scowled at the others as he waited for their response.

"Um - Harry, do you know about the prophecy?" ventured Wormtail after a moment's hesitation.

"You mean the prophecy that Voldemort was so crazy about? Of course, I knew. Would I be exerting this much effort if I didn't?" retorted Harry angrily. He was expecting some suggestions not irritatingly foolish questions.

"No, not that one. About the other prophecy?" said Wormtail reluctantly.

Harry looked confused. What prophecy was he talking about? He glanced at Snape's puzzled expression. He didn't know about it either. Draco and Ginny was trying to recall something but they, too, appeared blank.

"What do you mean, Peter?" asked Severus mildly but the thin set of his lips revealed his slight irritation about the lengthy introduction.

"T-there was a prophecy made years before you were born but it was never completed." said Wormtail uneasily.

"To whom was the prophecy given? Why was it not completed? How do you know about it?" asked Draco curiously.

"T-to me...Unfortunately, before she could finish the prophecy, the dark lord called me and I left immediately." admitted Wormtail. "She

was predicting HOW the chosen one would vanquish the dark lord."

"Oh! Why didn't you let her finish first?" said Ginny in frustration, voicing out the other's own sentiments.

"Do I have to tell you everytime? I was scared...as always. The dark lord is so impatient. Severe punishment is given to those who keeps him waiting and I don't want that." said Wormtail regretfully.

"So, that's what you meant when you said you wanted to turn back the time." commented Ginny in understanding.

"No, not only that." said Wormtail, the strain in his voice was worth a thousand words of regret. "... but I think it was better that way. At least the dark lord did not learn of how you're going to defeat him."

"Unfortunately, I don't either. But maybe we can just ask the seer about it. Who was the seer by the way?" said Harry, in deep thought.

"Sandra Trelawny, the only sister of Sybill. She was killed during the first war." was the reply.

"You mean the prophecy is lost forever?" asked Ginny.

"It is possible that some other seer could pass on that information but it would probably take years to find out who and we could not stand guard to each and everyone of them to wait until they make a similar prophecy." stated Snape.

"Too bad her sister is an old fraud or we could ask for her help with that." said Draco, pursing his lips at the mention of the professor who had a habit of 'predicting' everyone's untimely and violent demise with every chance she got.

"Professor Trelawny may not be consistent but she had already made two correct prophecies. One was that I would be the only one who could defeat the dark lord and the other..." Harry looked directly at Wormtail's eyes before continuing. "...Voldemort's loyal servant would return and help him regain his body." Wormtail averted his gaze in shame. "Unfortunately, she also claimed that seers do not

'see' at will and they could not even tell when a prophecy is going to be made."

Draco shifted his position and turned to look at the decoration as if he was bored to death by the conversation. "I'm not sure about you but I am tired of this talk that only leads to nowhere. Why don't we stick to things that we can control and then worry about that later?"

Harry looked curiously at him. "That's weird! I was thinking of the same thing. We're beginning to think alike. Are you sure it's you, Draco - not my long lost brother or something?"

"Ha-ha, very funny! Be grateful that some of my Slytherin intellect rubbed off on you." said Draco with a slight hint of sarcasm.

"We need to have some inside information regarding the enemies' current activities. The problem is we have no spy there anymore and I'm very much certain that He knows about Draco and Wormtails' defection when they failed to return on time. It's dangerous for any of you and of course, Harry and Ginny are supposed to be dead." declared Snape suddenly, catching the attention of all whose minds were wandering.

"What about my brother Ron? Maybe we could talk him into joining His rank in the guise of avenging me." said Ginny but without much conviction.

"I don't think that would be a good idea, Ginny." said Harry. He would not dare to deliberately put his best friend's life in danger.

"Yes, my thoughts exactly! But I know of one person who could be perfect for that." said Draco.

"Not her, Draco. Too dangerous." reacted Snape at seeing the wary expression of his favorite student. He did not need to hear the person's name. He only had to look at his face and he already knew who he was referring to.

"I know." said Draco in monotone, a clear indication that he did not like it either but she was the only one who could do it.

"Would it be too much to ask who that person is?" asked Harry after failing to figure out who, aside from Ginny, could make him look scared and concerned at the same time.

"My mother."

No one was able to say anything as they all watched Draco stare hard at the ceiling, pretending to admire the magnificent top view that was so much similar to Hogwarts, but they all knew he was just fighting the urge to cry in despair at the prospect of putting his mother's life in peril for defying the dark lord.

Harry could almost feel the turmoil that was hammering inside Draco's head. He was amazed. Draco used to be so cool and collected. His eyes were always like cold ice especially when he stared at him during his taunting moods but now the ice had melted. The Slytherin prince stood before them like a commoner -- capable of feeling. And he was not yet sure if it was a good thing or not.

"Come on. Let's eat. I'm starving." said Harry to break the uncomfortable silence.

"My apologies but I need to go back to Hogwarts now. I don't want the others to get suspicious." said Snape.

"All right. Be careful."

After the departure of the professor, the four proceeded to consume the scrumptious dinner that Ginny had prepared for all of them. But the light atmosphere was gone. They all brooded in silence as they chewed each tasty morsel in their mouths. Not even polite phrases like 'Please pass the salt' or 'More rice please' were uttered. Why should they bother? It was not necessary. They could all use the summoning charm for that.

When they were all finished with their meal, a very tired-looking Ginny declared that she needed a rest while a guilt-stricken Wormtail decided to explore the home where he was once considered a treasured member -- not only to torture himself more with the memory

of his betrayal but also to cleanse his soul. Draco returned to the living room and started writing on a piece of parchment but the words were printed so unhurriedly that Harry, who was observing him closely, could imagine how much it was hurting him to write that letter to his mother.

"You're being thick, you know." Harry commented as he stared openly at the unfinished missive on the center table.

Draco forlornly crumpled the parchment and set fire on it. "You're right. Someone could easily intercept this letter and we'll all be in deep trouble." He uttered weakly and covered his face with his hands.

"That's not what I meant." said Harry. Draco did not say anything. "Involving your mother is too dangerous so I tried to formulate another strategy while we're having dinner. Instead of her, why don't we just do it ourselves?"

This time, a red-faced Draco slowly faced Harry. "Are you dumb? How could we possible get away with that?"

"Hey, get real! I have no intention whatsoever of joining that hideous creature's army. That's simply ridiculous for me. I am just thinking of going back to Hogwarts and continue our education. The term has not started yet. We could still make up for lost time." Draco looked incredulous at him as if he finally lost his marbles. "But we're not going as ourselves. We could disguise ourselves and go as transferees from other wizarding schools. Only the Headmistress and Snape would know and they could place us all at Slytherin house. It could work out. What do you think?"

The strange expression of Draco was immediately replaced by a cunning smile, a Slytherin trait that was unconsciously being adopted by Harry.

"That's a good one! Almost worthy of Slytherin -- are you sure you're on the right house?" commented Draco, nodding his head approvingly. Harry smiled mysteriously at that.

"Did you know I was almost sorted to your house?" he said with

utmost delight. Draco looked surprised. "The sorting hat was adamant in placing me there and I had to admit your house uniform would perfectly match the color of my eyes but I chose Gryffindor instead because someone tipped me off that all bad wizards came from your house."

"That someone was Weas--- Ron, I suppose. That's a pity but what's done is done. I'm sure you're regretting your poor choice now. See, you're even planning an elaborate scheme just so you could stay at our house." said Draco jokingly.

"In your dreams! Besides, you're Quidditch team sucks. I wouldn't be caught dead playing with a team like that." said Harry in the same teasing tone. Draco playfully punched his right arm in mock protest but Harry only laughed. The light banter was a nice respite for them after everything that had just happened.

Chapter 10 - The Term Begins

Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape made some elaborate request to procure three additional wands for the 'transferees' and now they surveyed the transformed teenagers with satisfied looks on their faces. They had performed some spells to alter their features and to conceal Harry's very noticeable scar. The girl now had jet black hair with a distinct mole on her left cheek. She was wearing dark brown matte lipstick and black eyeshadow that contrasted with her pale color, giving her the haunted appearance of a vampire. Both boys had colorful spiked hair and metal chains with weird-shaped pendants dangling loosely on their necks. The ugly scowl on their faces which showed their intense displeasure with their new 'look' only made them appear more menacing.

"Professor, can you please reiterate why we can't have the same vampire look as Ginny? We look like --- " said Harry indignantly.

" -- like overgrown chickens!" finished Draco as he checked himself out on a nearby mirror which sneered mockingly at him instead of giving him the usual praises he was accustomed to,

"Well, at least you look more like a ferret boy now, darling?" said Ginny, grinning mischievously at the two restless boys. Even Snape seemed amused with their discomfort.

"Now, now. Don't be stubborn, boys. That look would give everyone the impression that you are trouble-makers - perfect ticket to get into the "in" crowd at Slytherin." reminded Professor McGonagall sternly but the faint twitch on her mouth was a dead giveaway. Both boys glared at the others. "And Draco, remember that I placed you on seventh year even though you missed the whole sixth year just because you received high mark on your OWLs so I expect you to do very well this school year. Understand?" she added. Draco nodded mutely but he still did not look too pleased.

"Hrmp! You're enjoying this, aren't you?" grumbled the two boys.

"Indeed, we are!" declared Snape triumphantly. "But think of the bright side. At least you would be able finish your studies and defeat

the dark lord at once. That's like hitting two *birds* with one stone, isn't it?" he added in pure delight. The boys' scowl deepened at the mention of birds but did not argue.

"By the way, where's Wormtail?" asked Ginny, putting a clever stop to the current topic. Both boys appeared on the brink of hexing them senseless if they irritate them some more.

"Ahh, Peter. He's in the dungeon --- apparently cleansing his soul." replied Snape with a smirk. "I'm glad you came up with a better plan though. It saved me a lot of trouble."

"Cut it out. I'm not feeling very glad at the moment." declared Harry grouchy as he and the other two 'transferees' followed the professors to the Great Hall.

=====

The Great Hall was already filled with restless students when they arrived. The freshmen were fidgeting nervously as they waited for the sorting ceremony to begin.

"My brother told me we had to wrestle a troll or something..." said a scared-looking girl.

"Oh, my God! Is that true? I don't know any spells at all..." grimaced another terrified freshmen.

"Of course not! Haven't you read Hogwarts - A History? A sorting hat would place us to the house that suited our personality most." said a rather smug-faced little girl with curly brown hair.

The three snickered as they listened to their bickerings. The girl reminded them so much of Hermione that they could not help but laugh. Such innocence! When all had settled down, the three distanced themselves from the younger group. It would simply be too embarrassing to be identified with such naive company.

"Anderson, Sherbet" shouted Professor Snape, the new Deputy

Headmaster, to begin the sorting.

"Hufflepuff!"

The three impatiently waited for the sorting to commence while shooting dangerous stares at those who were foolish enough to give them curious glances.

"Look at those midgets! How come there are so many of them?" whispered Draco irritably.

"Shhh! Not so loud!" Ginny whispered back while Harry was busy scanning the worried newcomers waiting for their turn.

"Engel, Victoria"

"Ravenclaw!"

"I really feel terrible! I can't believe McGonagall made that McMillan Head Boy. I mean I would have been Head Boy you know, if not for some unavoidable circumstances." said a thoroughly disgruntled Draco.

"But I thought you don't want the position. I, for one, am so glad to be rid of my prefect badge." said Ginny sternly to shake some sense into him.

"I don't but it doesn't make me feel any better." said Draco grumpily.

"I can't find Dudley! Have you seen him?" asked Harry, breaking them both from their conversation.

"No, and I wouldn't know. I haven't seen your cousin before." replied Ginny.

"You have a cousin? What does he look like?" asked Draco, curiously looking through the line of the first years.

"Well, he's a little overweight with lots of muscles. And he's supposed to be in fifth year now unless he failed the accreditation exam set by

the Ministry." said Harry hastily before his gaze fell on the Ravenclaw table where he caught sight of a girl with long blond hair engrossed in a light conversation with a newcomer. The girl immediately looked in his direction as if sensing his presence. He smiled hesitantly and was surprised to see the girl smiling back at him. His smile faded at that and he moodily broke the eye contact with her.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Ginny as she noticed the sudden change in his mood.

"I'm only gone for a few days and my girlfriend is already cheating on me." a sucking Harry replied.

"What do you mean? And how do you know?" asked Draco, perplexed.

"I smiled at her just now and she smiled back." he said moodily. Ginny rolled her eyes at that while Draco just stared dumbly at him.

"Well, duh! You're his boyfriend. Of course, she's going to smile at you." said Ginny in exasperation.

"B-but she doesn't know it's me! I mean - I don't look like myself anymore." whined Harry.

"You're being paranoid. She's just being nice, you know." said Draco arrogantly as if he was a connoisseur on handling relationships.

"Welcome, first years! Now, I am pleased to announce that another student would be joining the fifth years in Gryffindor house. Dudley Evans, you may go to their table now." said the Headmistress after the freshmen had been sorted.

Harry's jaw dropped as he stared at his cousin. Dudley had lost considerable weight and he looked far better than he imagined. The protruding muscles was a plus factor for him, too. Several girls turned to give him appreciative glances as he walked anxiously to the Gryffindor table.

"That hunk is your cousin?" asked Ginny as she too gave him the

once over. Harry nodded. "I did not know he is so handsome."

Draco glared at Ginny but she ignored him.

"Neither did I. He has changed a lot since I last saw him" said Harry, still in shock. "But I guess it runs in the family." he added with a grin.

"We also have three transferees from another wizarding school. They would be joining the Slytherin House -- Miss Callah Meyers, Mr. Devon Antonio, and Mr. Lander Mooney."

The three approached the Slytherin table with all the cool elegance that they could muster. They heard several people from other houses gasp in surprise at their appearance while others merely shook their heads in disgust. But it didn't matter to them. The people they need to impress were now eyeing them approvingly.

"Now that we're all settled, may I remind you that the Forbidden Forest is out of bounds to all students and that the products from Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes are still prohibited in this school." stated the Headmistress and she looked at each student sternly to instill the warning on their minds. "To all students, please be informed that Hermione Granger is the new Head Girl and Ernie Macmillan is the new Head Boy. You may seek for their help if you have any problems. Your house prefects shall also be glad to assist you in any way they can. Let the feast begin!" she said after a while and the dinner table was immediately laden with mouth-watering delicacies.

"Cool outfit!" commented Blaise Zabini, one of Draco's closest allies. "What year are you in?"

"I'm in sixth year and both of them are in their seventh." replied Ginny nonchalantly.

"That's great! By the way, I'm Blaise and these are Pansy, Crabbe, Goyle and Nott." he introduced themselves proudly, as if he was announcing the members of the royal family.

"Aren't they the ones who studied at Azkaban last year?" asked Harry aka Lander, concealing his curiosity with a bored demeanor.

"How did you know?" Pansy eyed him suspiciously.

"It's all over the papers, pal. Nothing to it. Besides, it's bloody brilliant! How was it?" drawled Draco aka Devon lazily.

"It's boring." said Crabbe and Goyle.

"The minister just gave us probational pardon so we can finish our studies here - as if we care, honestly!" said Pansy with a smirk on her face.

"But you have to admit, no other student here could brag about that." said Lander and the Slytherin idiors laughed proudly.

"Hey, what do you do for fun here?" asked Ginny, munching daintily on a pumpkin cookie held between her fingers.

"Well, we usually make fun of students from the other houses - hex themselves sometimes for practice...." Blaise scrutinized the three. "...and if you're worthy, then we can let you in on other really great stuff."

"Yeah? Like what?" asked Devon as if he was not yet aware of it.

"...if you're worthy, you'll know." replied Pansy mysteriously.

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When the feast was over, all students were escorted by their respective house prefects to their dormitories. Callah and Pansy immediately went off somewhere while the boys lingered at the common room first.

"That Head Girl is one of Potter's bestfriend. She's bad news, I tell you. Nothing would make you an outcast here faster than making friends with her and the redhead git who follows her around. He was her boyfriend and also a great friend of Potter. They're the wrong sort, understand?" stated Blaise while Crabbe and Goyle flanked his side

protectively like bodyguards and nodded dumbly at everything he said.

Devon was annoyed by their actions but tried hard not to let it show. To them, Draco Malfoy does not exist anymore and Blaise Zabini is their new leader. He had to deal with that fact and besides, he did not need to feel this way. They were not a great loss on his part.

"No one orders us around, Blaise. Show us first why they are not worthy and then when we'll allow you to call the shots." said Devon tauntingly. Lander looked quizzically at him but he just gave him a trust-me-I-know-what-I'm-doing look.

Blaise looked pissed at his words but he relaxed after a moment. "A challenge, eh? We like that, don't we boys?" again his cronies nodded without a second thought. "Watch us squash those dirties tomorrow before our potions session." he declared arrogantly.

"Make sure you win." said Lander with the same tone as Devon's.

"We will." said Blaise with a wicked glint in his eyes then he led his cronies to their room.

Devon waited until they were out of hear shot before he said to Lander. "In this house, you won't get any respect if you agree at once to what they are saying. But you shouldn't appear as if you're defying them too."

Lander mutely acknowledged his comment and stared at the Slytherin common room. It still had the same rough stone walls with round, greenish lamps hanging on chains to the ceiling. There were still no soft and comfortable sofas like in their own common room - only high-backed chairs which, from his experience, was not really satisfying to sit on. A fire also crackled merrily under a carved mantelpiece with an intricate design that depicted a very outmoded fashion of a wizard duel. Looking around the eerie surroundings, he slightly wondered if they were doing the right thing.

"Your common room has not changed much since my last visit." he commented over his shoulder.

"You've been here before? When?" asked Devon in astonishment.

"Oh! Um --" Lander silently cursed himself for being careless but decided not to lie. "We - that means me and Ron - came here during our second year. End of story."

"How the hell did you two get in?" queried Devon, a little miffed that some students from other houses were able to enter their secret domain without his knowledge.

"Don't ask questions because you might not want to hear the answers." replied Lander cautiously, unwilling to offend him.

"No, I'm bloody curious. Who was the slimy git who betrayed our oath of secrecy?" he asked heatedly.

Lander raised one eyebrow and his mouth twitched in amusement. "As I have said, you might not want to hear the answer. The slimy git who let us in was YOU." he laughed at the look of incredulity on Devon's face. "...and I would not ask more questions if I were you."

"Yeah - might as well not. I feel like an idiot!"

"You were but I hope you are not now."

"I wonder what that idiot Blaise is planning to do tomorrow..."

"Well, he better not make it too dangerous or that might just be the most humiliating moment of his life..."

Chapter 11 - The Proclamation of Harry's Death

The shock had worn off and the overwhelming influence of Hermione and the rest of the older Gryffindors had trickled down to the least impressionable residents of their house. Unfortunately, the atmosphere at their common room was far from jubilant. Almost two weeks had passed and there was still no news as to the whereabouts of Harry and Ginny. So much for the DA and the Order's plan - they have not learned a single thing yet and it was driving them crazy.

"This is all my fault! If I had only listened..." said Hermione in anguish.

"If we had only listened, Harry might still be here with us. And if I hadn't been too stubborn..." said Ron with the same remorseful tone.

Neville, who was listening to their rantings, dropped the book he was holding with so much force that almost everybody turned to look at his direction. "Will you two please cut that out? You've been blaming yourselves since Harry's disappearance. It's not helping anybody, you know." he declared irritably. "It's nobody's fault and that's final. And if you really consider yourselves Harry's friends, you would be doing something constructive by now instead of whining pathetically!"

Ron and Hermione stared in surprise at the violent outburst of their usually laid back friend. They had forgotten that they were not the only ones suffering here and Neville's right. Moaning and moping wouldn't help them in their current predicament especially now that the Order members haven't visited Hogwarts yet.

"Do you have any suggestions, Neville?" asked Hermione politely.

"Why don't you pester your father until he gives you the informations we need?" said Neville moodily to Ron but before he could reply, the door opened to reveal the creepily somber Fred and George Weasley. They looked so tired and weak that nobody had the heart to question them. The twins eyed them guardedly before one of them spoke.

"We went to the ministry to visit dad." said Fred mournfully.

"And we were there when they brought the body..." said George, his

"Almost beyond recognition? T-then is it possible that it wasn't H-harry?" asked Cho tearfully.

"We were not sure at first - until we saw the lightning shaped scar which was unique to him alone." replied the minister sadly. "And if you don't mind, I would rather not discuss the details of his death right now."

His listeners nodded fervently. Nobody really wanted to hear anyway. It was just too depressing.

"S-so Ginny really did it...my very own sister!" whispered Ron almost to himself. "I can't believe it! My little sister is a murderer!"

Although numb with shock, Hermione managed to explain what Luna had shown them to those who was not aware of it yet.

"You can hate us now, Luna." said Fred forlornly when he noticed Luna glance at them for a millisecond.

Luna slowly looked up from her book. "I don't hate you." she said evenly before returning to her reading.

Professor Snape watched the young girl's reaction carefully. Her response was not natural. It seemed a little forced and out of tune. She even appeared disinterested about the current topic of the conversation. Did Harry stray from the plan and communicated with her despite of their previous agreement? Or did any of the three slip up and somehow alerted Luna to their presence?

"Come on - hate us. Hex us if it would make you feel better. We deserve it." argued George stubbornly but Luna ignored his plea for punishment.

Hermione felt a tiny glimmer of hope. Maybe, this was just another of Voldemort's tricks and Luna could still sense Harry's presence that's why she was taking everything so calmly. "You don't believe it was really him, Luna?" she tentatively asked the girl.

Luna looked up again, impatient at the disturbance, but Snape had caught her eye before she was able to deliver her scathing reply. She immediately understood the silent warning that Snape was sending her. Forcing a more sorrowful demeanor, she gradually turned to Hermione.

"Yes, I do." was her simple reply that crushed the tiniest hope that Hermione's question had inspired into the others' hearts. "But no amount of grieving would bring him back to life. There's only one thing that we could do - and that is to finally defeat the instigators of all this evil things ... Voldemort and his army."

"Luna is right. By tomorrow, Harry's death would be all over the wizard newspapers and we could soon expect Voldemort to make an explosive come back. We have to be prepared. DA would have to be reinstated to help other students learn to defend themselves." said the minister.

"Warnings have to be propagated to the wizarding community through the Quibbler. And I suggest that we drop the pretense. It is utterly unfair for Harry to let them think he had turned evil at the last moments of his life." said Neville.

McGonagall and Snape looked at each other hesitantly at Neville's words. It was not part of the plan but could they blame the others for thinking that way? They simply had to agree because doing otherwise would make everyone suspicious that something was amiss.

"Yes, I suppose it is the right thing to do. We'll let you take care of the Quibbler and the students' additional training." said Professor Snape.

"That would be a pleasure, Professor." stated Lee, resolute in giving a very useful defense lesson for the other students.

"The Order could proceed with its normal task of tracking them down and hopefully prevent any atrocities that they might be planning to do next." said Moody with the same heavy tone.

"I could inform Remus to try to seek the allegiance of the werewolves once again." said the minister.

"And of course we could depend on Hagrid to inform the giants about the current situation." said Professor McGonagall.

Several more suggestions were given and their grief was soon replaced with a grim determination to conquer evil. Details had been polished to perfection and with each progress, their agitation deepened, hungry for blood of those who made their lives so miserable that they almost forgot to live. Finally, when they felt they had already extracted all the creative juices in their minds, the meeting was adjourned and each left with renewed vigor.

Except for Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and Luna.

"What's the real plan?" promptly asked Luna when they were the only ones left. "And don't even try to fool me with your words. I know something's going on at Hogwarts." she added when she noticed the strange look that passed between the two professors.

"What do you mean?" asked Professor Snape to discern how much she really knew. He still had no intention to divulge too much information unless he had discussed it with Harry.

"Why is Harry parading around the Great Hall in an outlandish getup and why was he in Slytherin?" said Luna without even batting an eyelash.

"W-we don't know what you're talking about, Miss Lovegood." denied the headmistress but to no avail.

"Let me handle this, Minerva." said Snape then he turned to Luna. "How did you find out? Did he communicate with you?" he asked without confirming their own knowledge.

"No, I did not but I saw him at the Great Hall with Draco and Ginny." she replied.

"You were able to see through the disguise?" asked Snape in amazement. He could not believe it because only a handful of highly skilled wizards could correctly identify people whose appearance was

protected by enchantments - not even Voldemort himself could do that.

"Yes. So could you please tell me now?" stated Luna matter-of-factly.

"Alright, Severus, kindly bring them here." said the headmistress in a weary tone.

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Lander and Devon were already about to sleep on their bedroom after a terribly exhausting and boring conversation with Blaise and his troops when they heard a soft knock on the door as if afraid of waking anybody else up. They both looked over to where Blaise was curled up and snoring to his heart's content. Confident that he was not bothered by the noise, they carefully opened the door to see who dared disturb them at this ungodly hour of night.

It was Callah aka Ginny. She was anxiously rubbing a fake galleon on her hands as if her life depended on it.

"Hey, darling! Missed me already?" asked Devon confidently, wrapping his arms around her lovingly. He thought he was the reason she was there.

"Did you feel it too?" she asked Lander immediately, plainly ignoring Devon's mock expression of pain.

"Yes and I chose to ignore it. You should, too." Lander replied while Devon examined the galleon curiously.

"What the hell is this thing?" Devon asked and Lander hastened to explain while Callah tapped her foot impatiently.

"What do you think it means?" pressed Callah with a concerned look on her face.

"It simply means that they had already found out that Harry Potter was dead. That's very clever of Snape. He engineered it all." he

answered with a smile. "So, we better ignore it and head for bed now.
The action would start tomorrow."

CLICK

They all turned to the door and saw the Head of the House approach
them silently.

"You should all come with me to the Headmistress' Office. There's
something that we all need to discuss." he said simply and headed
for the door without waiting for their reply.

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The next day...

The three new Slytherins headed for the Great Hall with the loud-
mouthed Pansy and Blaise and his cronies.

"Hah! Look at those sniveling idiots. I bet they heard the good news
already." said Pansy with pure delight on her face and tried to sit
beside Devon but Callah was quicker.

"Don't even think of it. He's mine." said Callah and she glared at her
venomously. Pansy raised her perfectly shaved eyebrows at that but
she shrugged it off and slid to the vacant chair beside Lander
instead.

"Hiya, handsome. Want me to give you a Slytherin tour later?" she
asked, fluttering her delicate lashes at him.

Lander cringed inwardly at the sight but maintained his cool. He could
get information from her especially when there was no one else to
warn her.

"Sure, babe, anytime." he drawled in his best imitation of Draco.

Pansy flashed Callah a triumphant look and returned to her food.

"What 'good news' are you talking about?" asked Lander in between mouthfuls.

"Potter's dead. Their hero was gone and there's no one to save them anymore." answered Blaise, looking very proud as if he was the one who did it.

"Oh, really? I wonder what's the big deal with that Potter kid. I mean he can't be more powerful than the dark lord, is he?" asked Callah conversationally.

Pansy frowned at her insinuation. "No one can ever hope to be more powerful than the dark lord. That Potter is just a nuisance to him, you know...playing saviour all the time." she sneered.

"What about that Malfoy kid? I heard someone mention his name on the way here. Something about that boy being the Slytherin catch or something. Where is he?" asked Devon to check if they knew something already.

"Oh, that brat?" exclaimed Pansy as if she found the mere mention of the name extremely irritating to her sensitive ear drums. "We have no news about him yet. Last thing we knew he was being punished for his disobedience but now he's disappeared with that sleazy blood traitor. I don't know what he saw in her."

"Never speak of his name again. He's considered taboo in our house these days. My father said that his father is now personally hunting them down including the other traitor." declared Blaise arrogantly, giving the impression that the topic should be concluded immediately.

Devon and Callah nearly choked on their meals but went on without commenting. Lander seriously considered the information they had just unearthed. Lucius was looking for Draco, Ginny and Wormtail. That meant Voldemort and his minions knew about their defection already and that only meant that they had to be extra careful about their detective work. Sooner or later, they would hear about the 'cool transferees' and they were not that stupid not to figure things out. He just hoped that it would be later.

Suddenly, the tables were bombarded with overexcited owls. Newspapers and parchments were being dropped everywhere.

"May I have the attention of everyone please." shouted Professor McGonagall before the students could peruse the day's paper. All eyes turned to her at once. "I regret to announce that Harry Potter is no longer with us. He perished in the hands of Voldemort and he died saving our world. Please do not let the papers deceive you. Harry remained loyal to the light side until his death." She carefully looked around the tearful and shocked faces of the students...there were even some from the Slytherin table. "Yes, it is Voldemort. In this light, may I inform you that aside from the protection that this castle offers, I have arranged for some very capable students to train you all to defend yourselves in case all things fail. It will not be graded but please try to do your best. The final test will be during battles against evil and failure could cost you your life. That is all. You may go to your classes now."

Chapter 12 - The Encounter with the Mudblood and the Weasel

"Excuse me." said a tiny but confident voice.

Lander and Devon knew who was speaking even before they turned around.

"I'm Hermione Granger, head girl." she held out her hand politely but nobody took it. Unfazed by their discourtesy, she continued. "I'm wondering if you would care to join our Defense Club this year. It's called Dumbledore's Army and we train our members to fight against the dark arts ---"

"We're not interested." said Lander quickly before she could say anything more. Snape warned them to limit their conversations with them to a minimum and if possible, none at all.

"--B-but ---"

"Didn't you hear him, you filthy mudblood?" said Blaise with utmost contempt.

"Fine! As head girl, it is my duty to invite everyone else for the training but I forgot you don't need to train 'against' the dark arts. After all, you are all 'for' the dark arts, aren't you?" replied Hermione with the same fervor.

"Hermione! There you are! I've been looking for you." exclaimed Ron as he ran towards her then he stopped in his tracks when he noticed the unfriendly company. "What are you doing with --- them?" he said incredulously.

"Begging for alms, Weasel. To buy food for the beast inside your stomach." said Pansy wickedly. Ron turned crimson at once.

"Actually, she got tired of you and wanted a piece of our new friend here." said Blaise mockingly as he pointed at Lander.

"Why, you!" sputtered Ron in anger.

"Come on, Ron. Save your breath. We should not waste time with this bunch of losers." said Hermione as she pulled Ron away before he lost control.

"Losers? Maybe it's you, mudblood. Now that your hero is dead, no one could save you now. Did you know he was begging for dear life before the dark lord killed him?" taunted Blaise. Hermione and Ron immediately went rigid with rage and had their wands out within seconds. Pansy and Blaise drew their wands too but ordered the others not to bring out theirs.

"It's not true. Harry would never do that and neither would we!" yelled Ron and waved his wand dangerously.

Blaise's eyes glazed with excitement. "You want a duel? Come then. Let's see how badly Potter had trained you."

"IMPEDIMENTA!" shouted Pansy at Ron but he ducked in time.

"ENGORGIO!" he countered and Pansy immediately started to fill out like an inflated balloon and slowly she rose into the air, shrieking in fright.

"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!" yelled Blaise in fury and pointed his wand at Hermione but she was able to block it with a simple shielding charm.

Enraged, he tried a different tactic. He pointed his wand at Ron and yelled "CRUCIO" but at the last minute, he changed his direction and the spell hit Hermione but amazingly, she did not feel any pain at all. She smiled with relief.

"That's against the rules, Zabini! STUPEFY!" shouted Hermione at him then she carefully plucked his wand from his unmoving fingers.

"That's a nice one, Herm. Finite Incantatem!" said Ron while pointing his wand at the floating Pansy whose clothes were starting to rip at the sides. He too pried the wand away from his fingers while whistling softly.

"Ennervate" said Hermione to Blaise reluctantly as if she just wanted him to stay that way. "That's how well Harry had taught us." she smirked at all the Slytherin who witnessed the encounter.

"Yeah, don't mess with us again or you'll pay dearly." said Ron with the same half smile before the two of them left.

"Oh, by the way, you can get your wands from the Headmistress. I'm sure she'll be happy to return them." said Hermione over her shoulders then they both laughed and headed to the Headmistress' office at once.

"You bozos, why didn't you help us?" yelled Blaise at the others after the two had left.

"We thought you could squash those dirties as you said." said Lander in mock amusement. Blaise didn't seem to appreciate his pun and shot him a piercing glare. Devon nudged him slightly.

"Just a joke, Blaise. Besides, we didn't want to get involved. We're just new here, you know. We couldn't afford to get expelled this early. Maybe later..." he added and gave him a conspiratorial wink.

Blaise tension eased up at once and returned his wink which promised another worthy encounter with the Gryffindors later in which they would emerge victorious.

"I'd be waiting for that moment. Here, follow this path. It will lead you straight to the dungeon for our Potions lesson. We just have to retrieve our wands first." said Blaise. "Damn those Gryffindors!" he muttered under his breath as he dragged the tearful Pansy to the office.

=====

"Hey, Ron, did you see the curse hit me?" asked Hermione later.

"Yeah, I wonder why you did not get affected by it." replied Ron.

"You mean you have nothing to do with that?" exclaimed Hermione in surprise.

"Yeah. I'm not that powerful enough....only Har--" Ron's eyes suddenly went wide with astonishment. "No, it's impossible."

"What's impossible?"

"Forget it. I'm just not thinking straight." said Ron dismissively.

"No, I heard you said that only Harry could do it. Have you really looked at the transferees? What if one of them was Harry?"

"It's impossible, Herm. His body had been found and identified properly. Don't let our hopes up again. It only hurts us more when we do that. Please..." implored Ron.

"O-okay." agreed Hermione weakly but in her mind she had formed her own resolution.

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"Good morning class. I think some of you know me by now but to those who don't, let me introduce myself. I am Professor Remus Lupin, your Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor." he said with a warm smile to everyone.

Lander and Devon groaned at seeing the professor. Blaise looked approvingly at them.

"So you also find him deplorable...that's good. He is a werewolf. I don't know where this school is coming to." said Blaise in disgust.

Lander and Devon nodded in agreement but their negative feelings were channeled to a different level. Lupin was an Order member and his strong werewolf characteristic could identify them fast through their scent alone. They both hoped that the additional protection that Snape had placed on them would work to perfection.

"I know that you are all very capable at handling complicated spells. On your seventh year, you would be performing more advanced incantations. Most of these would appear on your N.E.W.Ts at the end of the year so you better work harder. I understand that the Imperius Curse was shown to you during your fourth but you were not really able to practice it. So today, we would be learning how to use and counteract the Imperius Curse and for that, we need a demonstration. Any volunteers?" Professor Lupin eyed the students expectantly.

Many students raised their hands, mostly DA members. Harry had already taught them how use and deflect that unforgivable curse although not everyone could throw off the spell as fast as he could. Professor Lupin was aware of this so he felt confident enough to call on any one of them.

"Alright, Miss Patil, please come here." he instructed. "The incantation is 'Imperio' and you need to concentrate to break away from the spell."

"Yes, Professor."

"Imperio!"

Parvati suddenly wore a glazed expression of someone being hypnotized. The professor ordered her to sing and she performed a song number in front of the class but when she was ordered to jump outside the window, she broke off the spell and smiled proudly at everyone. The class gave her a generous applause except the ones from Slytherin who were all yawning as if the demonstration was boring enough to lull them into sleep.

The professor looked worried at their reactions. If they refused to be attentive in class, then those who were not already serving the dark lord could be easily manipulated.

"Mr. --- what's your name again?" he called on one of the new students from the Slytherin House. Perhaps a demonstration on one of them could make them pay attention.

"Mooney -- Lander Mooney." answered Lander promptly but his tone implied that he'd rather be watching instead of being the subject.

"Hmm...I wonder where you got your name." said the Professor, smiling slightly. Lander wanted to return the smile but he donned a blank expression instead.

"You know what to do?" Lander nodded. "Alright at the count of three....1.....2.....3....Imperio!"

Once again, Lander felt the familiar floating sensation that made him feel light headed. Then he heard the command. 'Sing for us!'

'No, not that please...I don't like singing.' he thought but he knew he should comply. He opened his mouth to sing when he realized he did not know any wizard song yet and singing a muggle song could make the Slytherin suspicious of the purity of his blood.

"La lalala lalalala....lalalala" he hummed instead since he could not sing anything.

Then another command followed. 'Dance for us'

Lander inwardly groaned again and felt like hexing Lupin to make him stop those ridiculous commands but fortunately the professor changed his mind. 'No, not that one. Levitate your whole body.'

'Fine. At least that one is easy.' Lander thought as he started to rise slowly from the ground. He could hear the professor's explanation as he levitated.

"Now, see here, class. It would be almost impossible for anyone to levitate their bodies when they were conscious because most wizards believe that it was impossible. But with this curse, you could make a person do almost anything because in this state, wizards knew no bounds. They only follow the commands." said the Professor then he ordered him to go down and removed the spell off him.

"Mr. Mooney pair up with Ms. Granger and practice. You --" the professor pointed at Devon. " -- practice with Mr. Weasley. Mr. Zabini,

you may do so with Ms. Patil." he went on until everyone in the room had a partner.

Lander grimaced as he stared at his partner. Fortunately, Hermione mistook it for disgust and glared openly at him. Devon, on the other hand, was having the time of his life. What a nice way to start the day for him! Making Ron do whatever he wanted but Lander noted that he particularly strayed away from making him do really embarrassing and dangerous things. Apparently, he took his threat seriously. It was a good thing that Blaise was busy with his own problem to notice their lack of rudeness to their partners.

The professor watched as the students performed the spells on each other but was mainly focused on the transferee who gave a demonstration a while ago. There was something remotely familiar with the way he handled himself. He obeyed all his commands but his eyes did not have the same glazed look and his response to his orders were not instantaneous. There was something definitely unusual with him.

"That was excellent, class. Two rolls of parchment about the effects of Imperius Curse and how to counter them to be submitted next Monday. You may go now." The students turned to leave. "Mr. Antonio and Mr. Mooney, please stay for a while."

Lander and Devon reluctantly stayed.

"Did we perform badly, professor?" asked Lander courteously.

"Oh, no, not that. On the contrary, you both performed very well." the professor replied then he eyed the two carefully. "According to Professor McGonagall, you both came from Durmstrang, correct?" The two nodded. "Well, I was just wondering if you're advanced or behind our current lessons so that I could extend you extra help if necessary."

"Thank you, Professor Lupin, but I think we could manage." said Devon quickly.

"Can you please tell me what you have taken up at Durmstrang so

that at least I would have an idea?" inquired the young professor kindly.

"Well, it's almost similar to your curriculum here. We learned about werewolves, vampires ----" replied Lander indulgently although he wondered where all these questions were heading.

"Legilimens!" said Lupin suddenly, almost catching him unaware....but not quite. He was able to stop the memories from reaching the surface on time.

"My! You're a skilled Occlumens as well." commented the Professor then he turned to Devon.

Devon shot a nervous look at Lander who understood immediately. The professor was going to try to read his mind and Devon was not adept at it yet. Very slightly, he flicked his fingers to shield him from the spell. The professor looked strangely at both of them.

"Very well. I see you won't have any trouble with my class at all. You may go now." said the Professor and they both immediately hurried outside to get some fresh air.

"That was close!" said Devon, his breathing a little easier now.

"Yeah, I know. We really have to be extra careful from now on."

October 15, 1997

Several uneventful weeks had passed. Lander became more restless as the days flew by. He missed Luna but they could not be seen together. They did not even have a class together so it was more difficult. He had to be contented with sending her an owl from time to time although he never received any from her due to the suspicious nature of the Slytherins. It was a wonder that their relationship still survived. He has heard that a handsome guy from her year was courting her but Luna, thankfully, brushed him off.

There was no news from Voldemort. No dark activities present. And no more close calls. Blaise and Pansy still did not trust them enough to reveal some useful information. Their menacing looks were not enough. They had to live up to their reputation to get into the "in" crowd. Therefore, they need to be more daring. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

"Hey, Devon. Come on. Get up! We're going to hex some people tonight."

"W-what? Are you crazy? What for?" asked a sleepy Devon.

"I've just realized something. Blaise and Pansy refuse to tell us anything because we haven't proven ourselves yet. Now is the right time. Come on!" said Lander.

"And may I ask who shall be the sacrificial lamb tonight?"

"Anyone...we just pick a fight with anyone...even better if we chance upon Hermione and Ron. We could make it appear like were avenging their humiliation a few weeks ago." he replied. "Look, your lot are having a 'study group' meeting downstairs. If we leave at this time of night, Blaise would surely order someone to follow us around. Your housemates are not a very trusting lot."

Devon considered it for a moment then lazily got up and brought out his wand. "Okay, let's go."

The two made sure to make a lot of noise as they went past the whispering group at the Slytherin common room.

"Hey, where are you going?" called out Blaise and eyed them suspiciously.

'Bingo!' thought Lander. "Oh, nothing. Don't mind us. We just want to get some fresh air."

Blaise nodded and whispered something to Crabbe and Goyle. As the two made their way to the Hogwarts corridors, they heard two pairs of heavy feet following them. They smiled triumphantly at one another and blatantly ignored the noise as if they had not heard anything.

'Come on. Where are the people in the neighborhood?' Lander thought. They were getting tired from all the walking but still they had not met anybody unlucky enough to cross their path - even the caretaker.

"Hey, you two. It's past curfew. You should be on your beds by now." yelled a familiar voice. It was Peeves.

"Shut up, Peeves, or I'll hex you beyond belief." said Devon.

"Oh, I'm so terrified." cooed the poltergeist. "I'm going to call the professors. STUDENTS! STUDENTS AT THE CORRIDORS!"

"Silencio Vox!" said Lander and the Poltergeist lost his voice at once. He acted as if he was going to put another curse on him and Peeves disappeared immediately in fright.

"I wonder why he obeyed Fred and George during their flight in our fifth year." commented Devon as he watched Peeves make a hasty exit.

"That was probably because he was ordered to create mayhem which was what he enjoyed doing." replied Lander caustically.

"So, it's you!" exclaimed another voice. It was Hermione followed by Macmillan.

The two grinned at one another. 'Finally!' Nothing like hexing the Head Boy and Head Girl to put them in the good side of the new Slytherin prince.

"Yes, it's us. You have any problem with that, mudblood?" sneered Lander to make things more realistic but Hermione did not even bristle at the nasty label. She had gotten used to it by now.

"It's way past curfew. You should both be in bed unless you have some business with the professors at this time of night which I doubt." said Macmillan.

"We want to get some fresh air." declared Devon arrogantly as if that simple statement settled the matter.

Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared at them. "We're going to inform the Headmistress about this."

"Oh, no. You don't. We won't let such a lowly being like you get us into trouble." said Lander and raised his wand slightly. Devon followed suit.

"We won't sink to your level. Twenty points from Slytherin for threatening the Head Boy and Girl." said Macmillan and started to leave with Hermione.

"Petrificus Totalus!" shouted Devon immediately and Macmillan became immobile at once.

Lander smirked at them. "I told you we won't let you get us into trouble."

"Finite Incantatem!" said Hermione to her partner and turned to Devon and Lander. "The war is not between Gryffindor and Slytherin but if you insist then we'll gladly oblige. Stupefy!" she pointed her wand at Lander but it only hit the wall behind him.

He grinned wickedly at her before he casually waved his wand and said. "Rictusempra!" It hit Hermione squarely on the chest causing her to roll on the floor with laughter.

"Impedimenta!" It was Macmillan's turn but he was still too disoriented to aim properly. His spell missed Devon by inches.

Devon glanced slightly at Lander as if asking permission to do something. Lander nodded and prepared for what Devon was planning to do next. "Crucio!" shouted Devon and Macmillan fell on his knees in pain but Lander did something to lessen the spell's effect so they both knew that the pain was not that severe.

Lander realized that it was now time to end the 'fight' before it got out of hand. "Infernus Galacticus!" he muttered softly and held the small ball of fire carefully in his hand. "Do you concede?" he voiced out the question in the most venomous tone that he could muster.

Hermione's eyes fell upon the ball of fire then at Lander's face. She tensed for a moment as she stared at their opponents. Her expression became suddenly unreadable as she continued to stare. It was as if her mind was working overtime but not about their current predicament. Even Macmillan looked confused. Then without another word, Hermione grabbed Macmillan's arms and backed away from the two.

"Merlin!" exclaimed Lander softly to himself.

"What was that about?" asked Devon in wonder.

"I - I ---" he began but was stopped short when they both heard several loud footsteps heading their way.

"Amazing! You scared those two - unbelievable!" exclaimed Blaise and he patted their backs for a job well done.

"Yeah. It was a good thing that Crabbe and Goyle 'accidentally' saw you and called us. I reckon they thought you wouldn't be able to handle them." gushed Pansy at them.

'Accidentally - Yeah, right.' thought Lander sarcastically.

"And you used an unforgivable curse! Very impressive! I admit I had some doubts regarding your capabilities before but now I think you could be a worthy addition to our club." said Blaise solemnly.

"It was nothing, really." said Devon dismissively. "We just wanted to get them back for what that girl did to you, Blaise."

"Besides, we were bored." added Lander and hoped that the idiots would take the hint and invite them into their little 'study group'.

"You're bored? How come you didn't tell us? Join us then. We're having a party tonight." said Pansy excitedly.

"Where to?"

"At the common room - where else? Don't worry. Snape doesn't care." said Blaise. "Go get your other friend, too."

"That's great! We're in. By the way, what are we celebrating?" asked Lander curiously.

"The Dark Lord's initial victory party!"

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Hermione and Ernie did not go to the Headmistress at once. Ernie had decided not to report the matter immediately and Hermione agreed. She walked briskly to the Gryffindor dormitory to meet with the other DA members there.

"Password please." said the Fat Lady in the portrait.

"Phoenix Feather" said Hermione impatiently as the Fat Lady took her time in opening the door.

"My apologies, but someone was blocking the door so could you just give it a push." said the Fat Lady sweetly.

Hermione pushed the door and was surprised to see a number of Gryffindors staring in shock at the figure lying on the floor.

"What's going on here?" yelled Hermione. Her nerves were already on the edge since their encounter with the newcomers and this sight was not very welcoming at all.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're here. Hermione. Ron and Neville had already gone to fetch McGonagall. We were just having a discussion here when Lavender had some kind of an attack. She collapsed and her body was convulsing uncontrollably -- like she was being possessed or something." said teary-eyed Parvati.

"We tried slapping her but she wouldn't budge." said Fred anxiously.

Hermione racked her brain to figure out the logical thing to do when suddenly, Lavender's body twitched violently. Then she slowly opened her dazed eyes and spoke in a hushed eerie tone.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord had come...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...A terrible thunderstorm would arrive at the time when the final battle shall be fought...Seven loyal allies shall be with him...but one will not survive...The Dark Lord would invoke the spirits but the one would entrap their souls...his servants shall be overcome...he shall perish by his own sword ...and his remains shall reside at the snake's chamber till the end of time...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord had come..."

"Oh, my God! The lost prophecy!"

Many heads wheeled around to find the ashen face of the Headmistress followed by their Professor Lupin, their current house head.

"Please take charge, Remus. There's something that I urgently need to do." she said excitedly and left without another word.

When the Headmistress was gone, Professor Lupin was bombarded immediately with questions.

"Did she just make a prophecy, Professor?" asked Ron curiously.

"What did Professor McGonagall mean?"

"What lost prophecy?"

"Who's the one who could vanquish the Dark Lord?"

However, the professor was unable to answer any of their questions. He was also mystified. If Harry was dead, then who else could the prophecy be referring to? Neville? But that can't be!

"Wait! First things first." he approached Lavender and requested some students to bring her to the hospital wing. Then he ushered the others to go back to their beds with the exception of Hermione, Ron and Neville.

"Professor, do you remember Malcolm - the one who taught us the Fireball technique?" Hermione began her endless queries.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" replied Lupin carefully.

"Professor, I was just wondering...that spell was very powerful, right? How come no death-eater used that spell before?"

Professor Lupin was taken aback. He did not expect that question and he was curious as to where Hermione was coming from.

"Malcolm is a very talented auror. He created that spell himself and it took him years to finally master it. That's why no death-eater could perform that technique. It was never taught to them and Malcolm denied any request to include it in the books. He said he would pass on the knowledge only to the worthy ones."

"You mean only the DA and Order members could perform that spell right now?" asked Ron in astonishment. It never occurred to him that they could cast a spell that not even the Dark Lord knew of.

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione. "Professor, can you please confirm with Malcolm if he had shared that knowledge with anybody else aside from us?"

This time, the professor could not hold on to his curiosity any longer. "I will do that tonight but could you please tell me why you are asking me these things?" he asked softly.

Hermione evaded his eyes and fiddled with her hands before she replied with a tormented expression. "I need to know, Professor, because if Malcolm confirms that he never taught anybody else, then I have good reason to suspect that Harry is still alive."

Neville looked stunned. "What made you say that?"

"Remember that new boy? He performed that spell a while ago."

Chapter 14 - The Werewolf and the Rat

Professor Lupin, Ron and Neville looked stunned at her words but carefully considered what she just told them. After all, Hermione was not known for saying anything illogical and not thoroughly pondered upon especially about something as important as Harry's alleged demise.

"Really?" asked Neville hopefully to no one in particular.

"Come to think of it. I have noticed something unusual with the boy too. The other one was not as strong but the one called Lander seemed very powerful." Lupin nodded his head thoughtfully as he tried to recall his past DADA sessions with them.

Ron was apparently in deep thought too and he exclaimed as he realized something vital that he had purposely ignored before. "Hey, Herm. If what you're saying is true then maybe it was really Harry who blocked the 'cruciatius curse' that Blaise ----"

"Excuse me! What are you talking about, Mr. Weasley?" exclaimed the properly appalled House head.

Ron shot a nervous look at Hermione before he replied. "Err-Professor, we - Hermione and I - had a run in with some Slytherin a few weeks ago and one of them used the Cruciatus Curse on Hermione but it did not affect her."

"This happened weeks ago and neither of you told me?!?" said the Professor incredulously. "You know that using the Unforgivable is a very serious matter, don't you?"

"Sorry, Professor. We forgot all about it." said Hermione apologetically.

"All right, we'll talk about this some other time. Stay here for now. I need to contact Malcolm tonight to clear this matter up before we say anything to the others. I don't want to give false hopes to certain individuals." The professor said sternly then he added as an after thought. "And yes, twenty points from Gryffindor for neglecting to

inform me about that particular incident. As Head Girl and prefect, it is your responsibility to report any untoward incident to the Headmistress and any professor."

"Yes, sir." said Hermione and Ron apologetically.

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Contrary to what he had told the students, Professor Lupin headed straight to the one place he knew he could find some answers -- Snape's Dungeon. He knew something was up. He could sense it, thanks to his werewolf instincts. He just couldn't place it. Minerva was knowledgeable but in cases like this, he had to admit Snape had more expertise. Besides, those transferees were all placed in his house. It was safe to assume that he knew their backgrounds.

He knocked cautiously on the blasted door. He could have easily walked in but he wanted to extend common courtesy to his fellow professor. He knocked again and pressed his ear against the door to listen for any sign of life.

There was --- A pop and a tiny squeak.

Puzzled, and without a care to what Snape would think, he walked in soundlessly to investigate. That tiny squeak was unmistakeably a rat's and he would stake his reputation that that was not just an ordinary rat.

"Lumos" he uttered and there, in the middle of Snape's office, he found a scared-looking rat who was too terrified to move. His gaze quickly flickered to its paws and immediately noticed that one was made of shining silver metal.

Without wasting time, he shot him the spell to force him to show his human form and quickly followed it up with a body-bind charm.

"What are you doing here, Wormtail?" he asked the thin man venomously, choosing to address him by the name fitting for a traitor like him.

"R-Remus, old friend, I w-want you to know that I'm really sorry for what I did." said the man and Lupin was amazed to see real tears falling down his cheeks.

"It's kind of too late for that now, don't you think?" said Lupin, his wand still pointed at the sniveling figure. He would never make the same mistake twice.

"N-no, it's not. Harry --- "

"What has Harry got to do with this?" yelled Lupin suddenly in a fit of anger. How dare this pathetic excuse of a man speak of Harry's name when he was the one who caused his suffering? "Harry is dead. Are you happy now?"

The thin man whimpered in fright but not once did he avert his eyes from his former friend's murderous stare. "H-Harry is alive, Remus. I know what I have done was unforgivable but I really regret it. Please forgive me."

"Because of your own selfishness, Lily and James died, Sirius wasted twelve years of his life in Azkaban and Voldemort came back to life. I don't think I can ever forget that much less forgive." He paused for a while to give himself time to recover from those nasty memories. "Do you know why I haven't killed you yet?"

Wormtail shook his head in despair. He knew it would be difficult to face his old friend after what happened but he never realized that it would be this overwhelming.

"I don't want to kill you yet because I want to clear Sirius's name even after his death. I don't want people to remember Sirius as a murdering traitor who betrayed his bestfriends. I want people to regard him as the great person he was --- unlike you."

Wormtail flinched inwardly at his harsh words but he couldn't say anything in his defense. What Lupin said was true - he was a murdering traitor who betrayed his best friends, even endangered their son's life several times. He didn't deserve to live but here he was,

still existing while his good friend had fallen. Harry Potter had saved him before but maybe he shouldn't have.

"You know why I haven't taken my own wretched life yet?" said Wormtail in a defeated tone.

Lupin looked at him in surprise. He was not expecting this. "Why?"

"Because I owe Harry my life and I want to be there when he needs it. He might not, but just in case, I still want to do it so that I can finally pay my debt." stated Wormtail unfalteringly, his meaning not lost on Lupin.

"Wait - did you say Harry is alive?" asked Lupin.

Just then, the door's dungeon flew open and revealed two teenage boys and a girl who were slightly panting for breath as they rushed inside the dimly lit office.

"Professor, we have something to tell ---" The three stopped suddenly when they noticed the scene before them.

"Yes?" prompted Lupin with one eyebrow raised in a questioning stare.

The three teenager looked unsure at one another before Lander replied rather insolently. "We didn't come here for you, Lupin. Where's Professor Snape?"

The professor scrutinized the new arrivals carefully until something clicked on his mind. "Harry, you can cut the pretense now. I know." he stated and watched their reactions closely. It was a gamble but he was willing to take the risk.

Devon and Callah stared wide-eyed at him as if he had suddenly sprouted another head on his shoulders. The professor watched with a combination of suspense and amusement as the two silently debated between themselves on what to say or do next. But nothing could have prepared him from Lander's reaction. The boy casually waved his right hand and unceremoniously shot colorful sparks at him.

The impact made him stagger backwards and he became instantly horrified at the idea that he had miscalculated in his deductions. He raised his wand to disarm the boy but then he realized that the boy did not have his wand out. 'How could this be?' he thought. Now that the initial shock had worn off, he also took note of the fact that he did not feel any pain at all.

The others just smiled knowingly at him as if attacking a professor was a common occurrence in that room. He glared at the students and summoned his most authoritative voice.

"What was that for?" he asked Lander.

"Sorry, Professor. That's just to make sure that you're really who we think you are. One can never be too careful these days if you know what I mean." replied Lander as he gave him a warm smile. "I knew it would not take you long to figure that out." he added.

"Actually, it was Ron and Hermione who gave me the idea. So I take these other two are Ginny and Draco, am I right?" replied Lupin, his relief at being correct was very evident.

"Fortunately, yes, or you would have found yourselves in big trouble now. That was a very dangerous risk you took, Professor." said Ginny in mild reprimand.

"Yeah." Lander agreed. "And you can release the body-bind hex on Wormtail. He's on our side now. He already volunteered to be turned over to the ministry after we finished the problem with Voldemort but as of now, he's here to help us." explained Lander.

"What about Ginny and Draco?" said Lupin as he removed the hex on Wormtail.

"Well, they haven't really killed anyone yet so I guess the ministry will be lenient with them."

"And Snape knew of these plans?" asked the surprised Professor in amazement.

"Yeah - both he and McGonagall knew. In fact, he helped us concoct this particularly cunning scheme." said Ginny, grinning in amusement at the recollection of the usually feared Potions Professor partaking in this charade.

"Harry, we're wasting time. We need to see Snape and McGonagall now!" said Draco as he checked his silver watch for the time.

"Oh, I forgot! Professor, Wormtail, I think you better come with us. There's an urgent matter that we need to discuss right now."

"Yes, I think we have and I think McGonagall and Snape are discussing Lavender's prophecy right now." said Lupin as he followed them to the Headmistress' office.

"What prophecy?" asked Wormtail, eager to join the conversation now that he was confident that he was safe from Lupin's wrath.

"I'm not so sure but McGonagall seemed very excited. She mentioned something about it being the 'Lost Prophecy'."

"THE LOST PROPHECY!" exclaimed Harry, Draco, Ginny and Wormtail at once that made Lupin very curious....very curious indeed as he allowed himself to run with the four extremely agitated individuals. Why was the trip to the Headmistress' office taking so long?

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"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord had come...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...A terrible thunderstorm would arrive at the time when the final battle shall be fought...Seven loyal allies shall be with him...but one will not survive...The Dark Lord would invoke the spirits but the one would entrap their souls...his servants shall be overcome...he shall perish by his own sword ...and his remains shall reside at the snake's chamber till the end of time...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord had come..."

The headmistress silently waited as the new arrivals read the copy of the prophecy she had conjured as soon as they had arrived. Though she had always been skeptical about the Divination teacher, she had some reverence when it came to true predictions. From what she had witnessed, she could safely assume that Lavender did not just come up with an elaborate theory.

"How the hell can we know when a 'terrible storm' will come up? And who are the 'seven allies'? Stupid prophecy, can't it be more specific?" commented Draco moodily as he finished reading the prediction.

"Watch your language, Mr. Malfoy." said McGonagall sternly.

"To be honest, I'm more concerned about the 'invoking the spirits' part...It sounds scary." stated Ginny in deep thought.

Harry was unusually silent as the others discussed the possibilities. He was more concerned about the identity of the person who shall not survive the battle. Seven allies shall be with him...therefore, they were people who were very close to him. Therefore, another close friend of his would be sacrificed again and be added to the mounting figure of casualties of war. Just another damn figure... He sincerely hoped he could prevent it from happening but what if he could not?

"What do you think, Harry?"

"W-what?" Harry's line of thought was broken and he immediately snapped to attention.

"We're discussing a very important matter here, Potter." reminded Snape. "We want to know your opinion about what you've heard at Mr. Zabini's party."

"Oh, that." Harry sighed heavily. Voldemort was making his move now and he was feeling very distracted. 'Great...just great.' he thought grimly. "Apparently, the death-eater parents of some Slytherins were too damn confident for comfort. Voldemort is going to launch a nasty attack on the Wizard's celebration of his supposed

defeat -- making a mockery of the Ministry and of the Order and DA
as well."

"Maybe we should just postpone the celebration." suggested Wormtail. His hands clutching his head as if it was about to break.

"It's in two weeks time. Do we have enough time to prepare for a counter-attack?" asked Lupin, his mouth set on a thin line.

"No but we cannot wait for that 'terrible storm' to come either. It just have to adjust its schedule. I want Voldemort and his army to be dead on the day that they are supposed to be." declared Harry stubbornly, determined to end this battle once and for all. He was tired of hiding. Tired of wearing Slytherin robes and not be able to play Quidditch. And most of all, he missed Luna and his best friends.

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Harry, Ginny, Draco and Wormtail were now at the Room of Requirments. While the Order members were holding a meeting, Harry had decided to call a conference of his own. It was time for the DA members to know the truth. It would be necessary for them to know that he was still alive to give them hope and the strength to fight in the upcoming battle. He did not have the time nor patience to discern who the 'seven allies' were. But surely they would come from the DA or Order members only. They were the only ones loyal to him at the moment considering that the rest of the wizarding world were still confused about what's happening.

As he gripped his fake galleon tightly, he noticed the tension in his three companions' faces.

"Are you sure they would come? They might think it's a trick." said Ginny apprehensively.

"Are you sure you want Wormtail and I to join you? Somehow, I get the feeling that they won't be overjoyed with this." Draco stated the obvious.

Harry only rolled his eyes in exasperation before he replied. "We'll see."

Chapter 15 - Unity of Opposites

"We'll see..." repeated Harry and a strange smile formed on his lips. He waved his hand ever slightly to his three companions who were currently too busy scaring themselves to notice what he was doing. Then he laid his weary back on the cushions and waited patiently.

He did not have to wait long. A rustling of movements was soon heard from behind the door then it opened so slowly that any unthinking person would blame it on a non-existent wind. He could only make out the outline of two forms though, both with their wands out and walking on their toes as if afraid to make the tiniest bit of sound. Chuckling softly to himself, he beckoned the two to disillusion themselves.

"My, my! I didn't know Moody has such an influence on you." he commented with a grin as the two showed themselves somewhat reluctantly.

"Harry?" said Hermione as she approached him but Ron kept his wand pointed at Harry.

"We need to be sure he's really Harry. This could be another trap." he said resolutely. Hermione nodded her head in assent.

Harry almost laughed out loud when he saw that. Hermione used to be the careful one and Ron used to be, well, a little impulsive. But he couldn't blame him for that since he was still sporting his punk disguise as of that moment.

"Umm --- Who is Grawp?" asked Hermione tentatively.

"He's Hagrid's 'little' brother." Harry replied promptly.

"What did I see when I looked into the Mirror of Erised?" asked Ron but his wand was not pointed at Harry anymore.

"You saw yourself as Head Boy and Quidditch --- "

Harry did not get to finish his sentence since an overzealous

bestfriend immediately took it upon herself to give him a welcoming hug. "HARRY!!!!!! I knew it's you!" exclaimed Hermione, her eyes watering slightly at seeing her friend.

"MATE!!!! Am so glad to see ---- Where's Ginny?" Ron also gave him a brotherly embrace but did not waste time questioning him.

Harry's gaze darted to the three perplexed figures who were now wondering why the new arrivals had not reacted to their presence yet but he did not reply.

"Oh! Luna will be sooo thrilled!" Hermione looked around and a frown creased her face in an instant. "Where's Luna?"

"Here." a dreamy voice replied, her dirty blond, waist-length and straggly hair swaying softly as she strolled over to Harry's side. Harry smiled at the girl and held her hand tightly.

"You didn't seem surprised." commented Hermione at the look of pure serenity on the girl's face.

"Why would I be?" replied the younger girl nonchalantly as she became more preoccupied with Harry's hair. "You know, hon, I think this rainbow tresses of yours is quite fascinating on you. It doesn't look good on Draco, though. His face is too pale."

Both Hermione and Ron rolled their eyes at that but Harry could only hide his amusement as he noticed the look of utter indignation on Draco's face.

Neville soon followed Luna's arrival. He had his wand out and Harry was impressed at the way he handled himself upon seeing him. Gone was the eternally nervous boy who couldn't even manage to squeak during a delicate situation. The boy who stood before him had the markings of a person who had entered a battle and won and would win again if the need arises.

"Hello, Harry." said Neville calmly as they shook their hands vigorously like two comrades who had just found each other after a terrible war and in a way, they were. "I feel a bit apprehensive about

the reason why you are revealing yourself to us right now. It's about Voldemort, isn't it?" he asked with a faint smile.

Harry looked at Hermione teasingly first before he replied. "Unfortunately, yes. I wondered how long it would take for someone to ask me that." Hermione blushed at the indirect reference to her failure to address the problem at hand but did not comment. Luna, on the other hand, looked nonplussed.

"See, Neville. You're really smarter than you give yourself credit for." she said and she gave him a warm smile before returning to her inspection of Harry's wonderful tresses.

Neville was later followed by the Weasley twins who came in as menacing death-eaters but couldn't stop themselves from hooting loudly when they saw Harry in Lander's getup. They quickly dispatched their hideous disguise upon seeing Ron and Hermione sitting quite comfortably on the sofa.

"Gee, Harry. I didn't know that when wizards die, they became reincarnated like that." said George, feigning a look of astonishment and innocence while hanging on to his own flame-colored locks for dear life.

"Remind me not to die, my beloved twin. That hideous hair! Better be dead than be mistaken for the ferret boy." agreed Fred, who was making a good show of staring at Harry's hair and squinting his eyes in disgust. "It would make a great prank, though."

At the corner of his eyes, Harry noticed Ginny was almost rolling to the floor with laughter while Draco was on the verge of strangling the Weasley twins. He decided that maybe now was not a good time for the twins to display their rather twisted sense of humor.

"Yeah, it would. Where are the others?" he asked, eager to get this over with. It has been a long night and he wanted to rest.

Within a few minutes, the rest of the DA members arrived with the exception of Lavender who was still at the hospital wing. Some also disillusioned themselves. Some decided to be clever and threw dung

bombs inside before they entered much to the annoyance of the others who were already there. While some were too careless to go in without any means of protecting themselves in case it was a trap. Perhaps it was a good thing that the Weasley twins were too distracted to think of pranking those careless individuals by wearing their death-eater garb once more or they would have been scared senseless.

Harry motioned all of them to come closer. He cleared his throat and before anyone could start asking impertinent questions, he began his speech. "Please listen carefully. All of you. I'm not going to repeat what I have to say. I know that Luna had shown to some of you my latest encounter with Voldemort. Yes, he's still alive. That bastard was too power-hungry to die that easily. The person you all saw perish last year was actually Bellatrix Lestrange." He paused for a while and took a deep breath. What he was about to say next might be too nerve-wracking for everyone present. Hell, to be honest, it even scared him...a little.

"The evil git has somehow gotten stronger and is currently under the delusion that he is indestructible just because he thinks I'm dead. How naive! By the way, we found out that he is planning to announce his presence to the whole wizarding world by creating havoc during the celebration of his supposed defeat. We're not sure about the details yet but the general idea was that he and his thugs would start their terroristic acts a week before the feast to build the tension, then it would culminate on the part of the celebration where Voldemort's defeat would be reenacted. The blundering dark lord himself plans to make an explosive appearance on the stage, throw a few cruciatus and avada kedavras on the ministry officials and proclaim himself as the new minister." He paused again to glance at his listener's reactions.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!" exclaimed the Weasleys, clearly horrified at hearing a mere fraction of Voldemort's plans. The others were not doing any better as they digested the information that Harry had just given them.

Looking at their alarmed expressions, Harry was almost gratified that he had some irregular rendezvous with the Dark-Lord-who-refused-

to-die and his lowly minions. Sometimes too much exposure to death-threats and undeniably evil dark lords had its good points too. It made one immune from shockingly mundane emotions such as terror and panic.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Neville once more.

Harry smiled at that. "Good question. Once again, you're showing the markings of a true warrior." Then, with a slight apprehensive look at Ginny, Draco and Wormtail, he continued. "If you can recall correctly, the sorting hat was very insistent about one thing - unity of all the houses. Sad to say, that's one of the things that we had '*forgotten*' to do due to our personal biases and unfriendly feelings towards certain people from a nameless house..."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying, Harry?" asked Ron incredulously.

"You tell me, Ron. Just precisely what do you think I'm saying?" said Harry without revealing anything.

Ron sighed heavily. "You want us to be nice to the Slytherins." he closed his eyes as if the mere mention of the house was giving him severe headache. Then he added as an after thought. "It's okay, I guess. Some Slytherins are not that bad."

Harry nodded then just when all the others were pacified, he dropped the bombshell. "What about Draco and Wormtail?"

No one said a word.

Harry waited and twitched his brows slightly as he did so.

"I beg your pardon?" Parvati ventured to break the very uncomfortable silence.

"Draco? You call that bastard who corrupted our sister, Draco?" sputtered Ron furiously. "Since when did he become your bestfriend?"

The twins just looked at Harry with an unfathomable expression.

"You're crazy to even consider that idea." said Hermione, her eyes blazing with anger and disappointment.

"No, he's not. He's brilliant." commented Luna, her eyes gazing dreamily at Harry.

"It's not that we don't trust your judgment but don't you think involving Malfoy and Wormtail would be suicidal on our part?" stated Ernie evenly.

"Maybe we should just stick with the less demonic Slytherins." commented another.

Harry could see that Draco and Wormtail were wincing with every blow that the members were throwing at them.

"The less demonic Slytherins don't know enough about the Dark Arts to aid our cause." Harry casually replied and braced himself for more violent reactions.

"Is that enough reason to enlist the aid of the Prince of Darkness himself?" asked Ron heatedly.

Amazingly, Neville who had been silent throughout the exchange, answered the question for Harry. "Yes, it is."

More silence followed. The DA's indecision was unnerving and Harry struggled to end it before it became uncontrollable.

"Please trust me on this. Draco and Wormtail have changed and they're willing to help us. They would share with us useful information on how the Death-eaters think and fight." Harry could see that some were still unconvinced. Luna, sensing his temper rising, quickly took over.

"Please be reminded that this war is not about petty house rivalries. We have already lost several good wizards to the dark side because of that. Anyone who decides to help us should be regarded as a

friend and not as an enemy." said Luna, her dreamy expression was replaced with a steely determination and a hint of annoyance.

"B-but Luna...Wormtail was the one who betrayed Harry's parents?" protested Hermione.

"Don't you think I know that? You're asking me the wrong questions." replied Harry impatiently. "You should have been asking me about the Lavender's prediction and how it could help us defeat Voldemort for the last time."

"Sorry." said Hermione and lowered her head in defeat.

"Do you all agree to letting Draco and Wormtail in on this?" Noticing the others' discomfort with the idea, he added. "Look, I'm not asking you to be chummy with them. I'm just requesting for a fair treatment befitting an ally. Alright?"

The others were still reluctant but nodded solemnly.

"That's good enough for now." said Harry and waved his hand to reveal the three figures who were nervously awaiting the DA's verdict.

Wormtail, stunned at being accepted, fainted on the spot. Draco stared directly at Ginny's brothers and mouthed a silent apology and murmured a soft 'Thanks' to everyone while trying to maintain a semblance of dignity to the Malfoy name. Ginny cried at being reunited with his brothers.

"Now that we have overcome that particular obstacle, let me tell you about the plan that we have come up so far. The prophecy tells about a terrible storm that will mark the final battle, then Voldemort would invoke the spirits. Maybe Hermione could head the research for that one. I think I'm supposed to trap their souls but as of now, I have absolutely no idea on how it could be done. I want us to be prepared just in case he raises his army from the dead." said Harry, speaking in a slow manner to allow the others to absorb everything.

"Raise his army from the dead?" asked a fearful Colin.

Harry grimly nodded his head.

"When will the storm be?" asked Cho.

"I don't know and I don't care. Let the storm adjust to our schedule." replied Harry somewhat irritably. He was tired of that 'terrible storm' thing. Draco grinned at his reaction.

"So what's the rest of the plan?" asked Lee.

Harry resumed his solemn expression. "The DA has to be divided. Some would stay to help the professors protect the castle against an attack while some would come with me, Ginny, Draco and Wormtail to prepare for Voldemort's takeover. Who would be brave enough to come with me?"

"I'm with you, mate." said Ron at once. "I'd better be there to ensure that a certain person would not be able to hex you when your back is turned."

"Now, why would I dream of doing that, Ron?" said Draco, hurt at being unfairly accused. Ron only glared at him in return.

Harry groaned inwardly but refused to acknowledge the mildly antagonistic exchange. "Who else?"

Several hands shoot up immediately but Harry only chose Luna, Hermione and Neville, the best fighters in the group. If they were going to stop Voldemort's plan for the feast, the light side needed the finest combatants for that.

"Hogwarts needs you more." he said then he turned to the four. "Pack some stuff. We're going tonight. Our house heads will provide an ample excuse for our absence."

"Where exactly are we going?" asked Ron.

"To Snape Mansion of course!" replied Harry and allowed himself a wicked grin at seeing their flabbergasted faces.

Chapter 16 - At the SnapeMansion

As their feet touched the solid ground, the group immediately recoiled at the repugnant sight of what Snape claimed to be his home. Anyone unfortunate enough to enter would instantly recognize it as a Dark Wizard's haven. No doubt about that. There were no colorful portraits to adorn the medium-sized living room, only strange-looking things hovering above them. All the furnitures were covered with repulsive snake skin and there were no comfortable chairs to sit on.

They had to settle on the cold, marble floor for that. The walls and ceilings were all black and their only source of light was the dimly lit fireplace. The hideous statues guarding the spiral staircase looked ready to devour any individual foolish enough to wander in its path. It would have been less horrific if there were at least some welcoming gestures from their host but, unfortunately, the unsmiling face of their host only heightened the already creepy atmosphere of the place.

"You call this a house?" said the disgusted Draco finally who expected the place to be somewhat similar to a regular wizard house -- not as grandiose as Malfoy Manor but habitable at least.

"Yes and I would appreciate it if you would keep your unsavory comments to yourself. You're not here for a vacation." reminded Snape in an even tone, his face devoid of any emotion.

"I think this place is very interesting -- " commented Harry much to the astonishment of everyone present and he could swear he chanced upon a faint hint of a smile on their host's face. He also heard some nasty insinuations regarding his state of mind but he just shrugged it off. That was a normal reaction to his comment anyway.

"For the benefit of those who cannot withstand a bit of discomfort, let me assure you that the rooms upstairs are quite satisfactory and complete with all the necessary amenities." said Snape in a tone that suggested that he consider those kind of people very weak in character.

"This definitely makes Sirius' house warm and friendly in

comparison." whispered Ron to anyone who would care to listen.

"And this is the Training Room." said Snape as he led them to a mysterious opening that revealed an even more daunting room filled with several equipments that made even Wormtail tremble with fright.

Ron surveyed the scattered equipments with great apprehension. "Harry, are you really sure we want to do this? This looks more like a Torture Chamber to me."

"Weasley, if you don't keep your mouth shut, you will find that these tools could do worse than torture your already battered brain." Snape glared at Ron who promptly shut his mouth to avoid risking his wrath.

"I wonder what this little thing does..." commented Neville as he stared curiously at a small article that looked like a harmless old hat.

"Would you like to find out, Mr. Longbottom?" said Snape with an ugly smirk on his face, clearly daring the boy to do something foolish.

Neville eyed the dirty old hat anxiously but to everyone's surprise, he met the Professor's taunting gaze and returned the favor. "Yes, I believe I would, Professor." With that, he bravely shoved the article on top of his head, expecting the worst.

Hermione and Ron exchanged worried glances but Draco, Ginny and Luna just watched Neville with growing fascination.

Neville glanced one more at the professor and gave him a half-smile as he waited for whatever was to come.

Snape's expression was odd. He sneered at the boy but did not voice out any sarcastic comment that he never seem to run out of.

Harry saw this exchange and smiled inspite of himself. Neville was no longer the fumbling, clumsy and accident-prone boy that he used to be but perhaps the Potions Professor had been too pre-occupied to notice it.

Suddenly, the hat slid down to fully cover Neville's face then it

constricted the neck part in such a way that would make the wearer lose oxygen within a short span of time.

Most of the witnesses panicked and hastily tried to remove the nefarious hat but to no avail.

Snape stopped them with an intensely cold glare. "You better watch this carefully." he informed them. Then he barraged Neville with a series of annoying questions that if answered truthfully, the hat would loosen a little to give him time to breathe but if answered dishonestly, it would tighten some more until a faint choking sound could be heard from inside it. Finally, Snape seemed to be satisfied and removed the hat with a spell that not one of the students recognized.

Wormtail immediately ran to the boy whose face was already turning purple from lack of air. He quickly performed some spells on him and ordered him to rest for a while.

"This is definitely a torture chamber." said Ron in a hushed tone.

Hermione and Ginny were still too appalled to comment. Even Draco, who had lived in a Dark Wizards' house all his life, seemed unnerved by what he saw. Only Harry and Luna seemed to take the incident in stride.

"Now I know why he turned out to be that way." said Luna as she eyed Professor Snape with sympathy.

"What - abnormally ruthless and anti-social git?" said Harry jokingly.

"Why did you that? You could have killed him!" exclaimed Hermione angrily to the Potions Master.

Snape smirked at her. "Granger, for someone who's supposed to be the smartest student at Hogwarts, you're displaying a disgustingly low ability to comprehend some matters. That's what you're here for - to learn and understand the Dark Arts - and I've just given you a demonstration." He paused to retrieve the offensive article that fell on the ground. "This is a 'Constrictor'. As what you just witnessed, it will force the wearer to reveal any information asked of him and if the

person's too stubborn to comply, the hat would tighten itself until the person can no longer breathe. Only someone skilled with the Dark Arts could remove it from the wearer's head."

"So, basically, it's just like the Veritaserum?" asked Neville who had just recovered.

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom, but unlike the Veritaserum which takes a full month to prepare and doesn't physically harm the drinker, the 'Constrictor' is more accessible and effective due to the excruciating pain it induces." Snape then regarded Neville with a little respect. "I must admit that I'm impressed with how long you were able to endure pain. Others usually panic and die from suffocation within a minute or two."

Others looked at Neville with increased respect. He was at it for more than fifteen minutes.

"P-Professor, is there a way to go around that thing?" asked Ginny timidly.

"There's always a way to go around anything...any spell even except the killing curse and it all boils down to MIND CONTROL which I'm about to teach you today if there are no more irrelevant questions." said Snape in his usual charming manner.

No one commented.

And so the rigorous training began...

The daily activities would usually start with a few minutes under the Cruciatus Curse -- Snape's and Wormtail's delightful way of waking them up -- then they had to try to stay under the 'Constrictor' as long as medically possible. This was immediately followed by drinking a few drops of Veritaserum -- Snape said that if they gradually consumed a large amount of that potion, they would be immune to its effects. Of course, an Occlumency lesson was also included in their daily dose of 'mind-strengthening exercise'. Then, after being severely battered and abused, that's the only time that they will be allowed to chew on a stale piece of plain bread and a glass of water.

"That will train you to survive if worse comes to worst. Do you think the Dark Lord is in the habit of feeding his captives?" spat Snape impatiently when Ron foolishly tried to complain about the inadequate food supply.

After the distasteful meal, if one could call it a meal, Snape and Wormtail would take turns placing them under the Imperius Curse until they could throw it off instantaneously. Then, the oh-so-merciful trainers would grant them the luxury of an hour or two of rest which was not very relaxing at all since they had to read voluminous chapters about the 'Characteristics and Actions of a Dark Wizard'.

The 'rest' would soon be followed by another disgusting meal. Then at exactly eight o'clock, Mad-Eye Moody would arrive to torture ... err..train them some more about the Strategies and Tactics of Muggle Dueling just in case they were disarmed and had to resort to hand-to-hand combat.

By the end of the day, the captives err...trainees would be too exhausted to care about anything but sleep which was limited to five hours only until they would be awakened again by the Cruciatus Curse.

And that was how they spent the whole week.

On the eighth day, they were pleasantly surprised to hear that Wormtail and Snape had to return to Hogwarts for a short meeting. They were even more delighted to hear that they had the time off and they could do whatever they want as long as they stay within the mansion and never enter the 'Training Room'. To top it all off, Snape had conjured some comfortable chairs so that they could eat properly on the dining table. They were provided with a very scrumptious meal that seemed foreign somehow after being used to having nothing but stale bread and water.

"I wonder what's going on." said Ron as he helped himself to a hefty serving of the dishes lavishly laid on the table.

Hermione eyed the food warily before she replied. "Maybe they

poisoned the food ... or maybe they were just testing us if we could control our hunger in front of this feast. Remember what we read about how the dark minds work?"

Ron and Draco choked on their food when they heard Hermione's statement. Neville spat whatever morsel was left in his mouth and Ginny promptly stopped eating. Unsure of what to do, they just stared forlornly at the wonderful spread in front of them, wishing they were back at Hogwarts where they could eat to their heart's contents without fear of any underhanded maneuvers.

"Hey, what's wrong?" asked Harry after seeing their expressions.

He and Luna had decided to spend the morning together to explore the house, talk about some stuff and well - whatever. They were making up for lost time and they just stopped for lunch.

No one said anything.

Harry and Luna took their seats and started to fill their plates.

Still no one said anything.

"Why aren't you eating? Is there a problem?" asked Luna when she noticed that the others were not even touching their food.

"Umm...We have some reservations about this meal. We're thinking that maybe it's poisoned or something." replied Hermione weakly. The others murmured their own suspicions about the motives behind the kind gesture.

To their surprise, Harry and Luna laughed.

"Oh, is that all? I thought it was something bad." said Harry.

"Didn't Professor Snape tell you?" said Luna.

"Tell what?" asked Ginny.

"That they are going to give us a practical test tonight and if we

perform to their standards, we could go back to Hogwarts tomorrow." replied Harry.

"Oh!" muttered Hermione and Ginny softly.

"WHY DID YOU TELL US?" ranted Ron as he shoved as much food as possible down his throat.

"Well, you asked..." said Harry, confused by Ron's reaction.

"Hmp! I didn't want to know." said Ron.

"Why not?" asked Neville curiously.

"Cause now I won't be able to enjoy the afternoon at all. I would be too busy worrying about that dreadful test." said Ron wearily. "Who knows what those evil minds have in store for us?"

"Don't worry Weas - Ron....No one's going to die." said Draco, grinning wickedly at him.

Everyone just groaned and continued eating.

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The afternoon passed too quickly for the group's liking. As expected, no one was able to relax upon learning what they were about to do that night. Right after lunch, the group practiced what they learned and tried to recall all the details that Snape had imparted to them.

By night time, the tension was already at its highest point. Every little thing seemed to get on their nerves. Only Harry and Luna were oblivious to everything around them. They were so engrossed on their own little world while the others were almost tearing each other's throats.

"WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY?" yelled an angry Ron.

"HOW THE HELL SHOULD WE KNOW? WE'RE ALL HERE!" yelled

an also irritated Draco. The suspense was too much for him too.

"IF YOU TWO DON'T STOP, I'M GOING TO CURSE YOU!" screamed Hermione at the top of her lungs while Neville vainly tried to pacify her.

"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!" shouted Ginny and Draco and Ron immediately froze on the spot.

"Hey, that's uncalled for!" said a red-faced Neville as he removed the curse on Draco and Ron.

Ginny glared at him. "FINE!" She was about to run to her room when something caught her attention.

POP!

POP!

POP!

Three cloaked figures appeared on the other side of the room.

Ginny was frozen on the spot. Another pop....and then another...and another....

"AAAAAHHHH!!!! DEATH-EATERS!!!!" she yelled immediately and started attacking the intruders.

The others in the group quickly spun around and joined the battle. Soon, the place was sizzling with colorful sparks and electrifying curses. Jets of light were grazing each of their skins, wounding them but they just ignored it.

"CRUCIO!" shouted one cloaked figure and hit Neville but he was already used to the pain. He managed to free himself by quickly sending a strong stunning spell to the figure.

Ron and Hermione produced a very powerful shield charm to deflect mild curses while sending fireballs to the enemies. Draco tackled a

nearby death-eater who was trying to attack Ginny. No one even got near Harry and Luna due to the immense power that they were radiating.

Suddenly, someone summoned several 'Constrictors' and charmed it to capture all the students but the hats never even lasted a minute on their heads. And the students had enough sense to continue firing spells while struggling to break free from the 'Constrictors'.

The battle became even more intense as more Unforgivables were hurled unrelentingly by the enemies. The group, sensing that they were dangerously outnumbered, disillusioned themselves to even the odds. But they were disgruntled when they noticed that the enemies could still sense their presence and were even able to remove the charm.

"Luna, Ginny, Hermione, combine your strengths to bind the enemies when I give you the signal." yelled Harry while wandlessly sending three dark-cloaked figures flying to the wall, knocking them unconscious. To his other side, Neville, Ron and Draco were also ferociously attacking the enemies. They managed to incapacitate five more unwanted visitors.

Behind their back, a number of death-eaters were preparing to throw a powerful spell at the boys but Luna quickly saw it and launched a spell of her own. Harry followed it up by a disarming and stunning spell then he levitated all the enemies to one side of the room.

At Harry's signal, the girls simultaneously conjured a magical rope to bind the fallen intruders to prevent them from escaping.

Soon, several intruders disappeared, leaving only the unconscious ones behind. The smoke started to clear out, giving the group a clear vision of their surroundings. The table was smashed and the staircase was broken. There were trickles of blood on the floor and some furnitures were reduced to ashes. Snape's house was a mess! But they had managed to get fifteen enemies, not bad.

Harry looked at his friends and noticed some minor burns and unsightly wounds but otherwise, they were all right.

"Why didn't Snape and the others arrive? Do you think we've been setup?" asked Hermione.

"I don't know." replied Harry simply then tensed again as he heard several consecutive sounds of people apparating.

Everyone immediately pointed their wands to the direction of the sound expecting another encounter.

"Merlin! What happened here?" yelled a familiar voice.

It was Arthur Weasley, Minister of Magic, and he was accompanied by Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey.

"DAD!" Ron and Ginny ran to hug their father at once.

"Poppy! Quick!" said the Headmistress and Madam Pomfrey quickly tended to the bound figures.

"We've been attacked by death-eaters, Professors. I think Snape set us up." said Hermione.

The Headmistress suddenly looked confused for a moment then her eyes lit up in understanding. "Oh, I assume you passed your test?"

"Test? What test? Didn't you hear, Professor, we've been attacked!" exclaimed Ron who was finding it difficult to comprehend why the school nurse chose to attend to the injuries of the enemies first.

"No, you were not attacked. Let me show you." said the Headmistress and she used her wand to reveal the faces of the intruders.

The group was stunned. They were all Order members!

"I think Professor Snape and I had a slight misunderstanding. When he told me that you shall be tested tonight, I assumed that it would be quite similar to an ordinary practical test. I never thought that he had a different idea in mind. But I admit his plan was ingenious. You were

caught unaware yet you were able to handle the situation to your advantage." explained the Headmistress. "And without any major injuries, I see. You did well."

Arthur Weasley chuckled softly. "I think our members need to train too. Imagine seven kids beating them!"

"So, Professors, are we going back to Hogwarts tomorrow?" asked Harry who was the first to recover from the shock.

"Certainly. Especially now that several Order members have to spend some time at the hospital wing." replied the Headmistress. Then she addressed the whole group in a low voice. "Kindly try to teach them a thing or two, will you? I never imagined them to lose this terribly. It's really humiliating!"

"Of course, Professor. It will be a pleasure!" replied the group with suspicious grins pasted on their faces.

"Hah! May I have the pleasure of WAKING Snape up?" said Ron, his eyes twinkling with anticipation.

"I would be delighted to prepare their meals." commented Hermione with a devious grin.

The Minister and Headmistress were puzzled but the rest of the group just roared with laughter.

Chapter 17 - Danger at Slytherin House

"I hope you're not seriously contemplating on putting 'that' plan into action." said Harry nonchalantly as he watched his bestfriend stealthily approaching the still asleep Potions Master with wand poised in mid-air, ready to wake him up from his deep slumber through a well-placed cruciatus curse.

Ron groaned and quickly lowered his wand. "And why not? He used to do it to us during our training." He mumbled though without much conviction.

"Well, might I remind you that Snape had a plausible excuse for doing so and you, considering that he's still lying unconscious and at the mercy of a stern mediwizard, are not in the position to do so." replied Harry lazily as if he was explaining a thoroughly simple lesson to a naughty child. "Besides, performing an unforgivable is a sure way to get into Azkaban."

Ron paled instantly and hastily hid his wand. He sighed. "You're no fun."

Harry laughed softly. "We can do fun things later after we finish Voldemort off."

"Don't be so damn confident." said a weak and muffled voice.

The two immediately turned to where the sound came from and were not so surprised to see the Potions Master struggling to get up from the hospital bed despite Madam Pomfrey's strict instruction that he was not supposed to do so.

Harry's eyes darkened slightly. "Please, don't be so damn pessimistic."

Severus Snape stared hard at the two boys before glaring at Harry. "I'm just being realistic."

"You don't believe we could do it?" challenged Harry with a startling coldness in his voice.

The professor seemed to sense it too for he replied in a more cautiously manner. "I do. I just don't want you to make a deadly mistake of underestimating the enemy."

Harry visibly relaxed and unclenched his fist. "Fine. I won't"

The professor nodded in understanding and closed his eyes as if he just woke up to give his opinion on that particular topic and now that he was finished, he wished for nothing but to return to his peaceful respite.

Harry and Ron reluctantly continued keeping watch on the hospitalized Order members while struggling to finish all homeworks that they have missed while they were away. Ron kept grumbling about the unfairness of the situation but wisely stayed away from delicate topics like death and destruction. It was bad enough that it was the flavor of the month of the school's gossip network without discussing it during their relaxation time. In fact, he would rather avoid it if possible.

Madam Pomfrey eyed the two boys impatiently as they went on with their endless chatter of Quidditch, stern professors and unjust work load but she struggled to maintain a calm facade as she went on with her work. Normally, she would never let them stay but the heightened alert level forced her to endure their presence in the hospital wing. She had to admit that she needed help to secure the safety of her patients if ever the need arises.

=====

Devon and Callah coolly made their way to the Slytherin dungeon hoping that nobody was around when they arrive. They just got back from their training and they were currently not in the mood to be pestered by nosy housemates. Unfortunately for them, the most meddlesome ones were still at the common room and immediately looked at their direction as they entered the place. They eyed the newcomers suspiciously and their stance clearly implied that they needed a very convincing explanation.

"Where were you?" demanded Blaise, his wand held at the side, ready to strike if their answer proved unsatisfactory.

"Didn't Snape tell you? He made us do some horrible project to make up for our incompetence in his class." replied Devon coolly, immediately reaching for his wand. He did not like Blaise's arrogant tone and he knew the git was just itching to establish power over them.

"With the Gryffindors?" asked Blaise in a malevolent tone.

"Definitely not. What a crazy idea! Snape would never subject to such utter degradation." stated Devon evenly.

"That's what he told us. We knew better." smirked Pansy as she too eyed Devon and Callah disdainfully. "Who are you?" She asked with such finality that the two became worried at once but tried hard not to show it.

"Are you insinuating something, Parkinson?" queried Callah with the same derisive tone to hide her nervousness.

"Our connections checked all Wizing Schools all over the world and not one confirmed your registry in their school. So I'm asking you one last time -- Who the hell are you?" Blaise's wand was now pointed at them. The others quickly followed. It seemed that they were not in the mood to play games tonight.

'Damn! Where's Harry when you need him?' thought Draco while staring at the grim expressions of his housemates. Four against two was not a bad odd for them but this was quite untimely. They could not afford to blow their cover so near to the final showdown. It would ruin their plan!

"Maybe they made a mistake, big deal. It happens, you know." replied Callah in a weak attempt to salvage the situation.

"Yeah." Devon readily agreed. "And if you don't have any other relevant things to ask us, we're going to sleep now."

"Oh, no, you don't. Petrificus Totalus!" shouted Blaise. Devon and Callah quickly rolled out of the way and formed a Shield to protect themselves.

Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle quickly hauled their own hexes at them but none came in contact with their target.

"Is this how you treat your housemates?" drawled Devon as if he found their efforts too novice for his taste.

"No, only for traitors." said Blaise and sent another powerful curse at them but the two were just too fast.

"Maximus Illusionus Reverso" uttered a familiar voice from behind Devon and Callah.

The two immediately froze. They knew that voice. It used to haunt their nightmares and now it seemed that the nightmares had come true. The figure slowly stepped away from the shadow and surveyed the disbelieving faces of the so-called 'traitors' of the Slytherin House. His long, silvery blond hair swaying lazily only added to their horror. His wand was pointed at them and the cane with a serpent carved on the handle was held loosely by his other hand.

It was Lucius Malfoy...as menacing as ever... and he was looking at them with so much loathing that the two knew they were in a very delicate situation.

Lucius turned to look at his young comrades and gave them a look of utter disgust. "How pathetic! I've wasted so much time in training you and you couldn't even defeat two ----- " His wand almost fell as he noticed the light emanating from the 'traitors' as they gradually reverted to their original appearances.

"Malfoy!"

"Weasley!"

The four young antagonists gasped in surprise while Draco and Callah cringed inwardly at the impending danger. The game was up

and all they could do now was to grin, bear it and try to escape unscathed.

"Well, well. What do we have here? It seems that the Dark Lord is correct once again." stated Lucius coldly while shooting daggers at his own son.

"H-he knew?" asked Ginny wearily.

"Of course. When Draco and Peter failed to return to the Manor that night, he knew. He just did not realize that you'd be foolish enough to go back to Hogwarts. Surely, you don't believe that this school could offer you protection from the Dark Lord's wrath." sneered Lucius. "Fortunately, Blaise here was able to provide us with a rather interesting information about three inquisitive transferees at Slytherin House. It did not take much long to figure out that you, Draco and Peter were those three." He appeared very pleased with himself for his clever deduction.

Draco glanced at Ginny, grateful that her face did not betray any reaction on the mistake on Lucius' interpretation of event. With an almost imperceptible nod of his head, the two started to run out of the common room but immediately froze on their tracks when they heard the evil laughter or Voldemort's right hand.

"How silly can you get! Certainly, we sealed the common room after you came in. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you're too important to be taken alive." said another familiar voice.

It was Macnair - another Death-eater! The man was followed by another dark-robed figure. Draco and Ginny paled instantly. They did not recognize the third man but he must be another death-eater to be in the company of Lucius and Macnair. 'Probably a new recruit.' they thought in dismay.

"The Headmistress would notice the interference in the wards if you attack us now." declared Ginny bravely.

Lucius stared malevolently at the young couple while his two companions only laughed at her declaration. The other four were just

enjoying the show, clearly confident that Draco and Callah had no means to escape especially with three adult wizards in their side.

"We have no intention of explaining our intricate methodologies to your feeble minds but rest assured that we could kill you in peace without anyone outside this room being the wiser."

"I'm your son." stated Draco simply, vainly hoping that the fact would make the older man lenient on them.

"You? An ungrateful and traitorous bastard who apparently had no spine on his body to uphold the family tradition! No, thank you. I'm quite proud to say that I have no son." retorted Lucius viciously that Draco flinched at his cruel words.

"Family tradition? What's that - to be a slave to a raving lunatic half-blood who acts like he owned the world but cannot even defeat a one-year-old baby?" shouted Draco angrily. He felt Ginny's hand reached for his in an attempt to calm him down but he refused to budge. "Groveling at the Dark Lord's muddy feet, merlin! Have you no dignity at all?"

"CRUCIO!" Lucius exclaimed but he was astonished when the spell that used to make his son beg for mercy did not have a lasting effect anymore.

"Surprised?" Draco gloated at the look of surprise on his father's face.

"Stupefy!" yelled Blaise, Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle at once but Draco and Ginny deftly dodged the curses and sent their own, careful to aim some of their curses on the common room door to force it open.

Macnair ran towards Ginny and hurled a conjunctivitis curse at her but missed by a mere centimeter. The other death-eater conjured a very powerful spell that blasted a nearby wall

Lucius carefully assessed the situation and sensed that the two were more equipped for a minor encounter like this one. Swiftly, he unearthed a magical rope from the secret pocket of his cloak and expertly whipped the two traitors. The two were fast but it was very

difficult to avoid all the hexes and the rope at once.

"Ahh!" yelled Ginny as the tip of the rope violently came in contact with her wand arm. Blood started to ooze from the broken skin and burned so terribly that her cursing ability began to dwindle. Draco saw this too and tried to cover her but a curse sent him flying to a nearby wall making him vulnerable for another attack.

"Destructo!" screamed Pansy and aimed it at Draco but before the curse could hit him, Ginny had screamed "Accio Draco" almost desperately.

"Take this!" shouted Lucius as he struck the two with the whip.

It hit Draco squarely on the back as he covered his tearful girlfriend and the wand fell from his hand from the excruciating pain that followed. The impact made him cough up for breathe and was horrified when he saw blood coming out of his mouth. He stared at Ginny and saw that she too was having some difficulty in breathing.

He tiredly reached for his wand and braced himself for another attack. He forced himself to face their attackers and projected a brave front.

"What now?" he smirked and tried to act as annoying as ever. He refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing him beg for mercy. Even another whipping that crossed his chest and made him cough up more blood did not wipe the smirk from his face. 'Let it be known that Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley died fighting evil courageously.' he thought, resigned to the hopelessness of the situation.

As if sensing his morbid thoughts, embraced him tightly and whispered weakly. "D-don't give up. There's still hope..." She then gripped the galleon tightly and hoped that help would arrive soon.

=====

The Head Boy and Head Girl have just finished making the final round for that night and were ready to return to their respective dormitories when they felt the familiar burning sensation from their

pockets. They paled immediately when they saw who was in trouble.

"Quick! If Draco and Ginny needs help, then the situation must be very grave!" exclaimed Hermione as she dragged Ernie to the Slytherin common room only to be blasted away by an invisible wall that hindered them from coming in.

"It...is...very....grave!" agreed Ernie as he struggled to get up from his ungraceful fall.

Hermione nodded and was vaguely aware of other DA members being hurled to the ground by an invisible force.

"Whoever was in there put up a powerful ward to inhibit us from entering the room." commented Padma Patil who was one of the recent victims of the invisible force.

"Yes and I know Harry's not in there so we really need to exert extreme effort to break the barrier. Maybe the Fireball technique could work if we simultaneously barrage the door with it." said Hermione.

"How do you know Harry's not in there?" asked Seamus. Hermione rolled her eyes at the seemingly idiotic question but chose to keep her tongue in check.

"Because trust me, if Harry's in there, Ginny and Draco won't be having this problem. Besides, I know that he and Ron are at the hospital wing to watch over the patients." she replied as politely as she can. "Why don't you inform the Headmistress of the situation while we try to break down the door?" suggested Hermione to which Seamus quickly agreed.

Hermione, Ernie, Neville, Padma, Parvati, and Colin quickly formed Fireballs and hurled it at the door at the same time. At first, they thought it did not work but after a few more minutes, a small hole formed on the door.

"At the rate we're going, it would be lucky if we could open it before sunrise." whined Parvati as her fireball started to diffuse. The others

were inclined to agree but could not do much but hold on and wonder what the hell was taking the others so long to respond to the call.

=====

Harry and Ron were busy playing Wizard's Chess when they felt the burning sensation in their pockets. Both immediately took out the fake galleon but with different reactions. Ron quickly got up and started to run but Harry held him off.

"Why? That's my sister!" exclaimed Ron and tried to break free from the iron hold of his bestfriend.

"I know but they've been trained well. They should learn how to cope. Our duty is to guard the patients. What if someone attacks them while we're out? They're quite defenseless and the Order could lose the most powerful and knowledgeable members if we act rashly." stated Harry calmly but he knew his explanation was falling into deaf ears.

Ron glared at him. "That's my sister! I need to help her. If you don't want to help then fine! Deal with it!"

"It's not just a whim and you know that." said Harry coldly but relented when he noticed the look of desperation on Ron's face. "Look, I'm sure the others will aid them quickly enough. But for now, we need to guard them. If there's an attack, then this is where we are most needed."

Ron still did not seem convinced. Harry sighed heavily. "All right, if I sense that they could not handle it, we'll go together. Okay?"

Ron reluctantly agreed and they continued with the game although Ron was still too pre-occupied to keep his focus. He was continually fidgeting nervously and his eyes were darting from side to side as if waiting for something.

"Ron!"

"What?"

"Don't be paranoid!"

"I am not paranoid!"

"Yes, you are!"

"No!"

"If you don't mind keeping your voice down...The patients need rest, you know." stated Madam Pomfrey irritatedly.

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As the intensity of the fireballs diminished, so was the spirit of the brave defenders. They were fully aware that every minute counts and it only takes a few seconds for the killing curse to be cast. Whatever was happening inside, they just hoped that Ginny and Draco could stall long enough to break down the barriers.

"We're coming...we're coming....hold on!" chanted Hermione furiously as if the mere mention of her thought could make it come true. But her courage started to fail as the Ernie's fireball started to flicker dangerously. Only Neville's and hers were still glimmering proudly but they knew their strength was beginning to fade too.

Hermione snuck a glance at the door and was dismayed to find that the dent was still too small. She glanced at the tired figures of Ernie, Parvati and Padma trying to regain their strength and gripping their galleons tightly. She gestured for Neville to let go for a while and they, too, called for help. After catching a few breathes, the five conjured fireballs again for a lack of more effective things to do.

Luna, still in her nightgown and looking as if she just rolled out of her bed, ran to Hermione's side and taking her cue from the older girl, she conjured her own but instead of an ordinary one, hers took the shape of a dragon that swallowed all the other fireballs before forming into a very powerful flaming sword. She fearlessly held the sword and traced the door until it fell on the ground, effectively startling all those inside into inaction.

All the DA members ran inside, with wands ready for battle and seemed slightly disappointed to find only three death-eaters and just four young stupid followers inside the dark and eerie common room. They noticed the two unconscious figures lying on the ground and all of them only had one thing in mind as they glared with utter detestation at their perennial enemies --- 'It's payback time!'

"What the --- " exclaimed Blaise but was quickly shut off by a furious paralyzing spell from Ernie while Neville, Hermione, and Luna took advantage of the element of surprise and quickly stunned the three adult wizards.

Padma and Parvati evidently enjoyed hexing Pansy for being an obnoxious bitch who took pride in spreading malicious rumours about anyone outside her house while Crabbe and Goyle ran cowardly out of the room to merlin-knows-where.

Professor McGonagall appeared with Seamus a few minutes later, a little disoriented at the sudden turn of events but was quite relieved to find Ginny and Draco had some injuries but were still alive.

=====

"Harry! The others are also calling us! Aren't we going to do anything?" Ron was almost hysterical now as he stared at the continous blinking of the official DA galleons with different names for each blink but with similar location.

Harry frowned and started to worry too but this was something that he must learn to do according to Dumbledore. He must learn to trust that others were also capable of defending themselves and it should not always be his job to save the day. But Ron was free to do as he wishes...

"You may go and help them Ron." he stated and averted his eyes from the piercing glare of his bestfriend.

"You really don't plan to help, do you?" yelled Ron angrily.

"I'm trying to make them strong."

"How's letting them die make them strong?"

"THEY ARE NOT GOING TO --- " Harry's words were stuck on his throat as he noticed several people hastily approaching the hospital wing led by the Headmistress who was carefully levitating the battered and bloodied bodies of two individuals onto the vacant beds. Madam Pomfrey became immediately worried and went to retrieve some healing potion and pain-relievers from her medicine rack. She quickly administered cure as soon as the bodies were settled.

Ron, after the shock at seeing the injuries, took one look at his sister's condition (never mind the other) and his expression darkened immediately. He glared ferociously at Harry and before anyone could do anything else, his bottled anger and frustration came out in the form of one very strong punch on the guilt-stricken face of the-boy-who-lived.

"BASTARD!" he spat angrily and walked off.

Chapter 18 - Painful Decisions

'Bastard!'

The horrible sound echoed in Harry's ears as he stared at the abrupt departure of his bestfriend followed by Hermione, probably to find out what was wrong. No one would have guessed that he felt anything but incredulity at his friend's outburst as he struggled inwardly to prevent the instinct to lash back from surfacing beneath his calm exterior. To others, he just appeared confused and a little unnerved by the situation.

"What's that all about?" asked McGonagall as she scrutinized his face for any sign but the stony face of the boy revealed nothing.

"Maybe he was just upset, Professor." He replied calmly. What he definitely did not need right then was parental advise from the people present. He was sure that such a little misunderstanding did not merit a full Order and DA meeting. There were things that he had to sort out on his own. He noticed that Luna was just staring directly at him for a reason that he could not fathom in his current state of mind but maybe he was just being paranoid. *'Was I mistaken?'* he thought. *'But how could we possibly hope to face a war if we did not believe in each other's capabilities? It would all boil down to me...and it was not fair! I couldn't possibly save them all from danger even if I already became powerful. Hell, even Dumbledore couldn't save all who perished during Grindelwald's time!'*

'Calm down, hon. Ron will come around. As you've said, he's just upset. Look, you're making everyone nervous.'

Harry nodded subconsciously before he realized that Luna had not spoken aloud.

"Madam Pomfrey, will they be all right?" he asked the school nurse instead.

"Yes, dear. Don't worry. They will be here for a day or two to recuperate and their wounds would take longer to heal but otherwise, they will be all right." replied the nurse good-naturedly.

Harry sighed with relief and turned to the Headmistress. "What about the Death-Eaters and the Slytherins, Professor?"

"I have already alerted the Ministry. Arthur and several aurors will be arriving soon to get them." she replied wearily. "I believe Madam Pomfrey can cope for tonight. I suggest you all go to your respective dormitories and rest."

Harry and the others nodded solemnly. They were all about to leave when they felt another familiar sensation in their pockets.

"What the hell -- "

"Not another attack!"

"IT'S HERMIONE!!!"

Harry swore under his breathe and led the others to Hermione's location while the Headmistress and other DA members remained at the Hospital Wing. It seemed that the castle was not secure anymore. 'Wherever she was, Ron might be there, too but why didn't he call for help earlier? Maybe Ron was too mad at me right now...maybe he thought I would not come to his rescue.' he thought ruefully.

When he reached the door to the Slytherin dungeon, he steeled himself for another battle but was horrified to instead find Hermione slumped on the ground, crying hysterically and with a look of utter dejection and bitterness on her face. Sizing up the situation, Luna quickly instructed their friends to investigate the place as Harry attended to Hermione.

"Where's Ron? What happened?" he asked her gently.

"Oh, Harry! They got him! I'm so sorry, I wasn't able to do anything!" exclaimed Hermione in an anguished tone.

"Him? You mean Ron? Who got him?"

"Death-eaters...Ron ran here to get revenge but he found himself surrounded by them instead. If I had only arrived sooner..." said

Hermione in between hiccups as she struggled to find her composure.

Harry felt a gnawing guilt on his stomach as he listened to her story but he tried to push it away to be able to think clearly. Then, an alarming idea suddenly formed on his mind..."Accio Marauder's Map!" He shouted and within seconds, the old parchment reached his hands. He tapped it softly with his wand. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Slowly the lines and letters appeared on the map.

Harry studied it carefully to see if there were any more enemies around. He found none. 'They must have gotten what they came here for. I wonder why they got Ron...' He looked at the parchment again and was pleased to find Professor Flitwick heading towards their location.

"Mischief Managed." he murmured softly and map went blank immediately as the tiny professor entered the door. It was time to let the professor in on their little secret.

"Mr. Mooney, would you care to explain what happened here? Minerva said there has been an attack." said the professor as he tried to assess the situation.

"I'll explain later, professor...First, we need to strengthen the wards. The castle is not safe anymore." Harry said quickly.

"But I can't possibly do that alone, Mr. Mooney. It needs at least four strong wizards to do that and if you're not aware yet, only the Headmistress and I are physically capable as of the moment. Maybe we could ask some help from the Ministry though..."

"Professor, we cannot wait that long. It would be very dangerous. Besides, you're forgetting that there's a student here who could perform in that capacity..."

"Yes, I know...unfortunately, that student has already perished in the hands of you-know-who." replied the professor almost tearfully as if the mere recollection brought back some sad memories to him.

"No, he's not." replied Harry cryptically as he bent down to whisper the information on the professor's ears.

The professor's eyes widened for a moment then it was followed by a radiant smile and a slight nod of understanding. "Well...if that's the case, shall we begin?"

Harry nodded and started to concentrate on their most urgent task. His only thought was that they must not fail as he poured all his energy to augment Mr. Flitwick's insufficiency. The safety of hundreds of students and teachers was in their hands. As the colorful light flowed from their wands to the wards outside the castle, Harry felt a certain sense of fulfillment even though he was gradually beginning to bear the brunt of such intense magical release.

Despite the tremendous pounding in his head and severe magical drain, he kept his concentration, barely looking at everyone else. He vaguely heard Professor Flitwick's remark that the wards were stronger already and that they could stop. He ignored him and continued what he was doing....only a few more holes....only a few seconds more....there...it's finished. The castle was safe ... at least for the mean time.

He managed a weak smile at the similarly worn-out professor before he collapsed on the ground.

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October 29, 1997

At the Hospital Wing

Harry opened his eyes slowly and was just starting to adjust to his surroundings when he heard a familiar drawl from a nearby bed.

"Glad you're awake now, Harry."

Harry smiled at the familiar silvery-blond-haired boy who spoke. He was looking quite healthy and rested unlike the last time he saw him.

"Nice to see you're still alive, Draco."

"I thought you're going to miss the final showdown though..." replied the boy.

"What do you mean? What's the date today?" a surprised Harry asked. Then he frowned as a thought occurred to him. "Why aren't you in disguise?"

The boy shifted position to be able to converse properly. There was no trace of humour in his voice when he replied. "It's October 29, just two days before the you-know-what..."

"WHAT???" yelled Harry, alarmed that he had been out for so long.

The boy ignored him and continued. "Anyway, the night that we've been attacked, Lucius..." Harry raised his eyebrow at hearing him refer to his father by his name only. "...performed an anti-illusion spell on us. They know."

"How much?"

"Not much actually. The reversal spell only confirmed what they already knew however, they are wrong on one account." Draco paused for effect. "...They thought the third transferee was Wormtail."

A slow smile spread on both of the boys' lips.

"Well...that mistake could be their downfall." said Harry then he eyed Draco carefully. "Are you sure you don't want to stay away for that event? I mean..."

Draco looked downcast for a moment before he replied. "I know what you mean...and much as I'm not exactly jumping up and down with joy at the prospect of another encounter with my father, I realize that it is something that I must do for my own peace of mind."

Harry considered this for a moment. There was something that he wanted to do right after the battle if they got lucky... Future plans that only involved him and Luna...his other friends too if they wanted

to...but what about Draco? What's going to happen to him afterwards? The boy had so much pent-up hatred in his mind that if left to his own devices too much, he just might grow up to be the next dark lord.

"What's your plan...I mean after the fight?" he asked Draco tentatively.

The boy just shrugged his shoulders and sighed heavily. "I honestly don't know...finish school perhaps...then take over our family business...spend some time with my mother...other than that, I have no idea." Draco got up slowly and tried to sit on Harry's bed. "Before, I thought my future plans were made. I'm going to follow my father's footsteps and be another loyal Death-Eater but now, everything has changed and I suddenly found myself living life on a daily basis with a very uncertain prospect of a future. Heck, I don't even know if I'm going to live for that. For all I know, I might not even live long enough to graduate."

Harry nodded thoughtfully as he pondered his reply. "I feel the same way, too." He stared directly at Draco's eyes as if trying to make up his mind about something important. "Actually, I have some sort of a plan. If we're fortunate enough to emerge victorious in this war, I plan to leave the wizarding world...permanently. Luna has a choice to graduate first or come with me at once. We're planning to live a normal life afterwards...build a school for the gifted perhaps or any other 'normal' business. If you want, you may come with us. We can start anew...a life without prejudices. It's your choice."

Draco stared dumbfounded at him and immediately pointed one trembling finger at himself. "You want ME to come with you? Are you serious?" Harry nodded solemnly and smiled encouragingly at his new friend to instill the seriousness of his offer.

Draco became misty-eyed at once but he carefully hid it by turning his back at Harry and heading quickly to his own bed. "I'll think about it, Harry. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. That's what friends are for."

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Hermione, Neville and Luna were all huddled at his bedside. Hermione and Neville were impatiently trying to dissuade him from pursuing his plan while Luna only listened intently at their discussion. Draco and Ginny were still sleeping peacefully on their beds.

"Harry, please don't tell me you're serious!" exclaimed Hermione.

"I already told you my plan ages ago. Why act so surprised?" replied Harry calmly, making it obvious that he was already determined to pursue his plans and that no one could possibly make him change his mind.

"You can't possibly do that!" said Hermione, her face turning the same color as Ron's hair.

"Why not? And it's not as if we'd lose contact, you know. You could even come with me if you want to."

"Aren't you going to be an Auror?" commented Neville, trying to make him see sense.

Before Harry could make any intelligent response, Professor McGonagall came rushing inside, her eyes flooded with concern as she waved a small bit of parchment in front of Harry.

"Mr. Potter, what is the meaning of this request?" she queried as if she could not quite believe that such an idea would occur to Harry.

"Just what I stated Professor. I want to take the NEWTS tomorrow so that I could be considered a full-pledge wizard by the 31st."

"But the year is not yet over. You couldn't possibly take that exam and pass."

"Not to sound too arrogant but I believe I have learned all I need to pass my NEWTs. Please, Professor, this is important to me. I haven't requested for anything since I got here, please grant my request just for this once. I need something to look forward to. I need to be able to think that after the war, I have something to LIVE for."

Professor McGonagall could not seem to find an appropriate reply for that. "I see."

"In that case, Professor, I would like to take the exams early, too." declared Hermione resolutely.

An involuntary cough escaped Neville's throat when he heard it. "Hermione?"

"I don't know about you, Neville, but I am already tired of this war. I wish to live a peaceful life after. Besides, isn't it unfair for the professors to prepare for the NEWTs of only one person?"

"I guess...but I can't possibly take the NEWTs with you...I don't think I would pass." said Neville ruefully.

"You don't have to do it, Neville. You can stay here. Your family is here whereas Luna and I have none. Hermione's parents are muggles so it would not be wrong if she wanted to spend more time with them in the muggle world." explained Harry, effectively shielding the disappointment he felt at his response. As much as he wanted to live a new life with his friends, he was also very much aware that they have their own lives to live too.

"What about you, Luna?" asked Hermione to the younger girl.

"Harry would be tutoring me so I don't need to stay here. If I'm ready, I would come back here to take my NEWTs." said Luna as if it was the most obvious thing to do.

"Hey, I could do that, too. Hermione and Harry could teach us, right?" said Neville excitedly.

Harry did not reply immediately. Instead, he turned to the astonished Headmistress and asked her opinion. "Is it all right for us to do that, Professor?"

"Well, it's not a normal practice in this institution but given your sacrifices, the least I could do is to make an exception in your case as a token of gratitude. Yes, Harry and Hermione could take the NEWTs tomorrow if they're ready and the rest of you could be home-schooled

and take the exams at a later date." replied the weary Professor but she also seemed pleased by their decision for a reason that she did not divulge to them.

"Does that also include us, Professor?" asked Ginny timidly. Both she and Draco eyed the Headmistress hopefully.

"Yes, of course." replied the Headmistress good-naturedly.

"DAMN!" swore Harry as he remembered something.

"Language, Mr. Potter." Harry mumbled a hasty apology. "What seems to be the problem, Mr. Potter?"

"I just remembered! How could I have forgotten!" Harry berated himself. "What happened to Ron?"

The Headmistress lowered her head at once and Hermione became teary-eyed but thankfully, she did not break down.

"I can only assume that Ron is being kept safe." replied the Headmistress nervously. "According to our intelligence network, they kidnapped Ron to ensure a win-win situation on the 31st."

"What do you mean, Professor?"

"We found out through the Slytherins that the enemies already knew of our plans to sabotage their attack on the celebration but they are still going to push through with it. If they win, then they would kill Ron for he no longer serves a purpose but if they find themselves at a disadvantage, they would use Ron to force the minister - Ron's father - to follow their biddings."

"But that's horrible!" commented Harry and swore under his breathe once more.

Ginny was too shocked to react but Draco looked concerned.

"Yes, Harry. But that's how the evil mind works."

Chapter 19 - The Proposal

October 30, 1997

Harry and Hermione were both sitting at the opposite ends of a vacant classroom near the Headmistress' office. They smiled at each other for support but somehow they both knew that they did not need it. Their expressions bore no semblance of nervousness or apprehension towards the early NEWTs. If anything, they were more anxious about Ron's condition than anything else and the test was just a welcome diversion.

The first written exam was History of Magic. Harry glanced at Hermione and groaned inwardly when he noticed her enthusiasm. She was clearly in her element and though he wasn't exactly dunderhead in that subject, he still felt a little resentful about her eagerness. He found it very odd. He liked Professor Binns and had utmost respect for his wide knowledge but his uncanny ability to put students to restless stupor was not really endearing -- he alone could make students fall asleep through a detailed discussion of Vampire clan wars and the violent take over of the dark lords of the previous century. Fortunately, Harry had a more competent teacher who patiently drilled the History of Magic into his wandering brain cells or he wouldn't be able to answer any of the questions.

...How did Albus Dumbledore defeat Grindelwand during his time?...

'Well, this is easy...' Harry thought. He and Professor had an in-depth discussion on this topic before hoping that he could learn a lesson or two from the old man's experience.

...Bonus question: In your opinion, how can You-Know-Who be defeated?...

'This is so pathetic! They couldn't even write his name on paper for goodness' sake! Anyway, this is easy...' He was a little put-off by the question. He could write a detailed narrative of his encounters with Voldemort, the resurrection at the graveyard, the prophecy and his plans to vanquish the Dark Lord...possible attacks and curses that he could utilize but he restrained himself...This was a tactical and

retorical question that must be treated with caution. Surely the professor was not seriously expecting him to answer it truthfully so he settled for a simple response that he hoped would summarize his whole thought - TEAM WORK. That should be enough.

After that came Defense Against the Dark Arts. Both written and practical tests were as easy as boiling water as he had expected. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that he knew more about it than the professor himself. Charms and Care for Magical Creatures were fairly easy too. He could safely assume that his respective professors for those subjects became very considerate when they formulated the test. Potions was a totally different matter, though. Snape deliberately made his exam more difficult than usual. It was either Snape was challenging him or he just possess a high regard for Harry's capabilities but nevertheless, Harry did not mind at all. Apparently, Snape was someone who wouldn't let up just because the student was special and he was thankful for that.

Transfiguration was also no better but Harry welcomed the challenge. No favoritism - that was an honorable policy and he wouldn't be the one to ask for anything substandard.

Harry was aware that the professors were still not happy with his request. After all, if they win the war, there would be no need to go. Unfortunately, peace was not just the absence of war in Harry's opinion. He wanted peace within himself. To be able to walk around without being mobbed...to be able to stay in a room without being goggled at just because he had the 'scar' ...to be able to enjoy his youth, something that he had been deprived of for so long...a life without extreme expectations. But perhaps they just didn't understand.

Hermione, Draco, Ginny and Neville must have felt the same too. Whatever happens, they would never be the same again. Draco would definitely continue to bear the stigma of being the traitorous son of a death-eater whichever side he was fighting for. Of course, it would temporarily be overshadowed by his contribution to the fall of darkness but once things have settled down a bit, people would revert to their usual assassination err - analysis of his character - whether he really turned to the light side because it was the right thing to do or he just did it for selfish reasons.

Hermione would also be forever thought of as the 'brain' in the group - the one who had the answer to everything, another one destined to make great things. People would begin to expect more excellent achievements from her - perhaps discover a cure for some obscure illness or maybe create a counter-curse for Aveda Kedavra - yes, something to that effect. With all due respect, she would most probably be able to do that someday but the pressure would be enough to drive her insane any day.

As for Ginny, maybe she was just tired too and a dignified escape would give her enough time to recuperate psychologically and socially. Her actions had severely damaged her family's trust in her and she was not ready to face that yet.

And Neville, he really did not need to go. The wizarding community was his world. If they could only find a cure for his parents, then he would be perfectly contented to stay there and make up for lost times.

With that thought, Harry finalized his answers and handed it to the proctors who were plainly astounded that he had finished earlier than expected.

"Are you sure, Mr. Potter? We were instructed to give you more time if you requested it since your case is a little unusual." said an elderly witch who looked a lot like Professor McGonagall except that she had a soft and kindly face of a mother hen.

Harry smiled. "Thank you Madam but I'm already done. There's no need to extend the time. And I believe my friend doesn't need it too." He said when he saw Hermione lazily got up from her chair too and handed her own answer sheets which was considerably thicker than his.

"Hey, Herm. Are you sure you didn't quote the whole book there?" said Harry jokingly.

Hermione eyed him exasperatedly. "Of course not. I just had to explain some things in detail. You know they might be looking for a particular answer and I had to make sure that I covered all

possibilities..." she paused for breath for a while "...I'm not really sure about the animagus transfiguration though. I'm afraid I would get a deduction there because I was not able to properly describe the feeling since I haven't experienced it first-hand yet besides..."

Harry quickly decided to change the topic before she could launch a thorough discussion of the test that he wanted to forget for the time being. "Shh...Hermione...it's okay...You're going to get a high score...possibly highest even. Quit worrying. Just be thankful that it's over."

"Oh, but it's not yet over, Harry!" cried Hermione in anguish, flinging her arms at him.

"I know. But don't worry. We'll be able to save Ron somehow. I won't let any of my loved ones suffer in evil hands again." declared Harry with a murderous glint in his eyes as he thought about the enemies who just did not know when to quit. "Why don't you rest for now? You'll need your strength tomorrow...for Ron, okay?"

Hermione discreetly wiped her tears away and went back to her room. Harry smiled at her sadly as he watched her go and subconsciously walked towards the Quidditch field. It was one of the things that he would miss the most when he return to the muggle world -- the exhilaration he feels when he was flying, the mind-numbing satisfaction he experiences when he caught the snitch mere seconds away from the hands of a worthy rival. But it was not as if he wouldn't be able to fly anymore, he rationalized to himself. Perhaps there would come a time when he would be comfortable enough to come back and see the new teams play, maybe give them a few tips or play a game with them himself. Perhaps in a few years...

"Harry..."

He turned around and saw the familiar blond-haired young man approaching with a broomstick held loosely at his side. He smiled as an outrageous idea crossed his mind.

"Accio Firebolt!" he yelled and the international standard broomstick rushed to his hand, pulsating vibrantly as if it was itching to be used

too.

"Accio Snitch!" he yelled once more and the snitch he had caught during his fifth year before Umbridge banned him flew right to his waiting hand. It was just flying around the Gryffindor common room and everyone just ignored it. For some strange reason, Dumbledore did not ask him to return the golden snitch. He just procured a new one from the store.

The blond-haired figure waited patiently as if he already knew what was going to happen next. "Just like old times eh?" He raised one eyebrow as he mounted his broom.

"Yes, but no monkey business please." said Harry teasingly.

"Hey, I don't cheat!" snorted Draco as he flew around the field to warm up.

"Yeah right! Like pulling my broomstick to prevent me from winning was definitely a good show of sportsmanship." Harry replied good-naturedly

"Those were the good old days..."

"Nasty old days, you mean..."

"Whatever..." Draco casually waved his hand and signalled him to begin the game.

Harry rolled his eyes as he let go of the snitch. "Now, let's play!"

The two most excellent flyers at Hogwarts raised their brooms simultaneously, almost hitting each other but their skill and speed prevented them from a very dangerous collision. The snitch suddenly went up several meters more but the two was able to follow it quite impressively. Their eyes never left the snitch. There were no other players to think of, no bludgers to look out for. It was only the elusive snitch out there and only the better player would be able to catch it.

The two were accelerating more and more and anyone who were

watching would not even recognize the players. They would only see two flashes of green blending through the night sky. Then, the snitch changed its course, forcing the seekers to change their tactics and direction, too. No one would catch it by just following it relentlessly. Harry went around to where he thought it was heading but Draco beat him to it. He laughed as Draco tried to clasp his hand around the winged ball only to grasp empty air as the snitch escaped once more.

They were so engrossed with their game that they did not notice two female figures following their every movement, cheering their every move.

Harry and Draco performed some aerial acrobats first as they searched for the snitch, enjoying the game for what it was, not for house points or Quidditch cup. Just a game. Then, they both caught sight of the golden flashes down below, near their limited audience and both dove at break-neck speed, trying to outdo one another.

Harry could see it now, just a few feet more and he stretched his hand. At the corner of his eye, he saw that Draco was doing the same thing.

"Go Harry!"

"Go Draco!"

Harry was snickering now as he saw the panicked expression of Draco as his fingers touched the wing...then suddenly his laughter vanished and his hand unconsciously went to touch his forehead. His scar did not hurt anymore but he could still feel any emotion that Voldemort was exuding. He was used to feeling his anger and annoyance but never elation and pure delight. It was unnerving...whatever it was that made Voldemort happy must be bad for the light side.

"I've got it! You lost!" shouted Draco, waving the golden snitch triumphantly. Ginny was hugging him as if he won the Quidditch finals.

"H-huh!" said Harry, caught unaware. His moments of distraction was enough for Draco to catch the ball but it did not bother him at all.

What he wanted to know was why Voldemort suddenly felt those emotions a day before the battle. What the hell happened?

"Harry, I didn't know you were such a sore loser." teased Draco but his smile vanished too when he saw Harry's solemn expression. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"It's Voldemort. He's happy and I don't know why. This is bad." replied Harry.

"Maybe he discovered something that he could use against you tomorrow." stated Luna. "Perhaps he had taken control of the Heliopaths and Crumple-horned snorkacks but they were very nice and friendly creatures. They would not obey him unless they were being threatened."

"Uh-huh!" commented Draco for a lack of something intelligent to say.

A very uncomfortable silence followed. Ginny and Luna stared at one another and it seemed that they reached a silent agreement for Ginny suddenly linked her arm to Draco's and started to pull him away.

"Come on, Drake. You need to wash yourself, you stink." Ginny broke the tensed stillness, wrinkling her tiny nose in disgust.

"I do not!" protested Draco in mock horror but followed Ginny back to the castle leaving Harry and Luna alone.

Harry and Luna sat on the ground, ignoring the tickly grasses and damp earth.

"I hate to think of what it could possibly mean." said Harry after a while.

Luna embraced him tightly. "Then don't think. It could be a ruse, you know, to confuse you and make you lose your confidence."

"I guess you have a point there." said Harry and shifted his position so he could properly hold her in his arms. "So are you really sure you want to come with me?"

"Of course, why do you ask?" Luna looked at him with her tender eyes that seemed to melt his heart.

"Nothing, just wanted to make sure that I haven't pressured you into doing something you don't want to do." replied Harry weakly.

"Oh, hon. You know I would follow you to neverland if you tell me to. I love you with all my heart. Don't you dare think otherwise." said Luna and leaned forward to physically assure her boyfriend that he really meant a lot to her.

The fire in both of them ignited furiously and the kiss deepened to make up for lost time. It had been a long time and no one was there to stop them. As they looked up, they caught a glimpse of the stars shining above them, the twinkle reflected in their eyes. They kissed once more, this time Harry's hands started to roam around Luna's delicate body. He could feel her shiver slightly at his touch and he realized that if they did not stop now, then he would not be able to control himself anymore. With great reluctance on his part, he extricated himself gently from Luna's embrace.

"Umm....hon...It's late ... Maybe we should go to bed now." he said hoarsely as if he had trouble controlling his breathing. 'Uh-oh! Did it come out all right?' he thought as he noticed Luna's mischievous smile.

"I think so too." replied Luna as she led him somewhere.

"Hey, where are we going?" he asked dumbly.

"To your dormitory." she replied innocently.

"Umm...Luna, shouldn't I be the one to bring you to your dormitory?" he asked weakly. He didn't really want to end that night but he didn't want to pressure her into anything.

"Harry James Potter! Sometimes you're just so dense..." she said exasperatedly and started to leave him in the middle of the Quidditch pitch.

Harry was stunned by her response. "Wait, wait!" he ran after Luna who was walking aimlessly around the field.

"What now?" she asked not looking back, still a little miffed by his reaction.

"W-why?" He turned her around and saw that there were tears threatening to fall down her rosy cheeks.

"Aaaaarrrgh!!!!!" she screamed in frustration and the tears started to flow uncontrollably. "What if something happens tomorrow? What if I die, you die or we both die and we wouldn't have the chance again?"

Harry looked around in panic and a sudden realization suddenly struck him. She was right. What if something happens that they could not control? "Calm down, please. Wait....please...just wait here. Don't leave. I'm just going to get something."

Without waiting for her response, Harry quickly ran to the Gryffindor common room, ignoring the lady asking for the password. He bumped the portrait rather forcefully and swore under his breathe as he rubbed his throbbing forehead.

"You didn't give the password!" declared the Fat Lady accusingly, rubbing her ankles.

"I was in a hurry!" yelled Harry.

"But you're not supposed to be in here!" argued the portrait, glaring at him.

"But you know who I am, don't you?" he asked rather stubbornly.

"Yes, of course, but still, you're not supposed to be here. You don't know the password."

Harry took heavy breathes to calm himself. He realized that he had to change his strategy so that he could get inside. "Umm...I apologize for barging in here unannounced. It's just that there's something that I

must get from my previous room. It is hidden very well and I couldn't just summon it. It's for my girlfriend...I hope you understand."

"Is it the ring?" asked the portrait as she eyed him suspiciously.

"Umm....yeah. But please don't tell anyone. It's supposed to be a secret." he said, staring at the floor in embarrassment.

To his surprise, the Fat Lady clasped her hands and sang in delight. "Oh! Merlin, why didn't you say so? I would have let you in immediately." she said and the door opened instantaneously.

Harry thanked her profusely and quickly ran to his room, ignoring the curious glances sent his way. He retrieved the ring and stared at it intently. He had been planning to propose after the battle but he just realized that he needed to do it as soon as possible for the next day might be too late. Minutes later, he returned to where he left Luna and was glad when she saw her lying on the grass, star-gazing.

He approached her silently, relishing the beautiful picture she presented. He tightened his hold on the piece of jewelry in his hand. It was a legacy from her mother. Something that was handed to him by Dumbledore, among other things, before he passed away.

"I'm sorry." he whispered, afraid to speak in a normal voice for it could destroy the mood of the moment.

"For what?" queried Luna in a hushed tone, still refusing to look in his direction.

"For acting like an insensitive jerk." he replied earnestly. He dropped to his knees and reached for Luna's left hand. "I just didn't know what to do."

That was true. He did not fully comprehend how abnormal his adolescent life had been until then. Heck, even Neville had more action than he did...but not due to lack of offers though. He just did not have the inclination to perform such a sacred act with anybody else. It was a very serious matter for him. He believed that it should only be done at the right time by two people genuinely in love with

each other. But what if the right time never came?

Draco and Ginny had already done it. He saw it when he intruded on Ginny's mind before. Perhaps Ron and Hermione too though they never talked about it. Maybe he was just too busy to think about it and the fact that the only person he considered doing it with was catatonic for almost a year only made it worse. He was not that naive. He had read and ogled the Playwitch magazine with Ron out of curiosity but that seemed such a long time ago.

"Err...are you still mad at me?" he asked tentatively, kissing her hand lightly as he did so.

Luna slowly got up to face him. "No, I'm not mad. A little pissed off...yes...but not mad."

Harry stared at her, biting his lower lip, unsure of what to do next. He kept on caressing her left hand, not fully aware that his action was starting to make her feel warm and tingly all over. Luna raised one lovely eyebrow and pinched his right cheek playfully.

"Oh, Harry! You look so adorable when you do that. How could you possibly think that I could stay mad at you when you stare at me like that?" said Luna, licking her lips nervously.

Harry tensed when he saw her movement and gazed at her lips as if he could not think of anything else. Then, a chirp of a passing bird brought him back to his senses. Prying his eyes away from her inviting lips, he carefully slipped his mother's legacy to one of her fingers and kissed it softly.

Luna was speechless as she fixed her eyes on the magnificent sapphire stone etched with a tiny symbol of a unicorn on her ringfinger. She looked at Harry and almost melted on the spot when she saw the sincerity and tenderness in his eyes.

"After the war has ended, will you give this poor soul a chance to spend the rest of his life with you, Miss Luna Lovegood?" Harry asked her with so much emotion in his voice that she knew it stemmed from the very core of his being.

She threw her arms around him and cried at the sheer exquisite nature of his proposal. "I will. Oh, Harry! I will. Thank you for loving me so much."

"No, the pleasure is mine." he replied and bent to seal the proposal with a heart-felt gesture of love.

Glancing at the stars once more, he noticed that Mars was very bright that night...but Venus was brighter than on any other night. Then as if sensing their need for privacy, the clouds gradually moved to cover the moon, effectively shielding them from the light. Mars was temporarily forgotten as two shadows intertwined and moved in rhythm to a symphony that they alone could hear.

Chapter 20 - Voldemort's Proposition

October

31,

1997

After the breath-taking act that strengthened their bond, Harry and Luna continued to lay in each other's arms, just contented on staring at the scattered dots shining brightly above their heads. The soft cushion and warm blanket that Harry conjured made them comfortable enough to refrain from going elsewhere. The night was fading, the impending doom hid around the corner, but they were not afraid anymore. They had become united and the strength of one became the strength of the other.

As they watched the sun rise gradually, they realized that they must return to their common rooms now but both were reluctant to do so. They were still savoring the moment and it was hard to let go of the emotions that had engulfed them a few hours ago.

'Who would have thought that we would end up together?' Harry mused as he stole a glance at the lovely person snuggled on his chest. 'And to think, I, myself, thought her strange when I first met her...'

"I thought you're quite bizarre that time too..." commented Luna lazily, caressing his chest in random fashion. At seeing his incredulous expression, she added. "You're thinking out loud, hon. But don't worry, I'm very much in love with you now and that's what matters."

"True... true...Did I mention that 'I love you' already?"

"I believe you did, Mr. Potter, several times actually." replied Luna, giggling softly.

"Well, let me show you once more..." said Harry, his eyes twinkling mischievously but a loud crack distracted him.

It was Dobby.

Harry groaned inwardly. From the looks of the elf's red face with ears

drooping shamefully at the side, he knew that he saw something he should not and was quite abashed by his intrusion.

"Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby! I am so sorry, Mister Harry Potter. I did not mean to offend you or anything." said the house-elf as he repeatedly bumped his head on the ground as punishment.

Harry quickly put on his clothes and pulled Dobby from his self-inflicted castigation. "Dobby, stop that! I'm not mad at you, just a little embarrassed."

"Mister Harry not angry with Dobby?" The house-elf slowly looked up and eyed him hopefully.

"Hi Dobby! What brought you here?" asked Luna after fixing herself.

The house-elf jumped up and down, whether it was due to panic or excitement was indistinguishable. "The headmistress wanted you in her office now. She said you must get ready."

"Oh!" murmured Harry and quickly vanished the cushion and blanket. "We'll go there now and by the way, you must be there, too."

Dobby puffed his chest proudly at his words and apparated immediately to the Headmistress' office. Harry and Luna opted to walk.

The first thing they noticed when they set foot inside the castle was the large number of students milling chaotically around the corridors and some hovering above the fireplaces as if they did not know how to use one. No professor was in sight, except for Madam Hooch and Filch who were attempting to put some order to the pandemonium that erupted.

They never stopped to ask anyone what the commotion was all about. Instead, they ran as fast as they could to McGonagall's office.

The meeting has started and all of them could feel the mounting tension as they finalized their plans.

"I have already ordered Madam Hooch to send the students to Crigod Commune immediately. We don't want any casualties here. Harry, have you already stationed some dementors to guard the place? Please be reminded that they should be near enough to secure the place yet far enough to have no effect on the people inside." said McGonagall in a weary tone.

"Yes, Professor, that has been taken care of." replied Harry then he turned to the house-elves present. "Kindly ensure that the dark forces won't be able to apparate out once the battle has begun. We want to finish this war today."

The house-elves nodded reverently. "We are most happy to oblige, kind sir."

Harry gave them a warm smile of gratitude before he switched his attention to the minister. "Mister Weasley, I'm sure this situation is very hard for you knowing that they might use Ron for bargaining, are you sure you could handle today's program? We can come up with some alternative if you can't."

The red-faced master of the Burrow shook his head furiously. "No! I have to do this not only for my son but for the others as well. I believe we could pull this off."

Harry thought for a moment but relented. "Very well."

"And I'm going as well." said a soft voice from a person sitting timidly at the far end of the room.

"Dudley?" Harry stared in shock at his cousin. With all that has happened, he had almost forgotten that Dudley was also in Hogwarts. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be flooing to your mom's home."

"I know but mum said that I should stand by your side today. She said it is little compared to what you have done for us." came the reply.

"And what about you? What do you think?" asked Harry shrewdly.

"I think she's right... I want to help."

Professor McGonagall worriedly stepped in. "Harry, I really hope you're not considering letting him go. He's far too young for that and is not that adept in dueling yet."

Harry sighed inadvertently. "The headmistress is right, Dud. Besides, your mum needs you more. There are lots of people who need protection at Crigod's."

"B-but --"

"No arguments now, please. I really appreciate the fact that you offered to help and that alone is enough for me. I also know you're gifted but, Dud, you're needed elsewhere. Do you understand?" said Harry in a soothing voice.

"Oh, ok." agreed Dudley reluctantly and left the room as quietly as he had come.

When Dudley has left, Harry surveyed the grim but determined faces around the room. One could assume that they were all ready to face death but Harry knew they were all nervous as hell. Who wouldn't? Well, it seemed that a pep speech was in order...

"I know what we're going to do today is very difficult and I believe it's scaring the hell out of everyone but we have trained comprehensively. There's nothing to fear. We are better prepared in this war now. We have more powerful allies on our side. Let me give you the odds: Due to our past efforts, Voldemort's death-eaters have dwindled down to a measly 539 and most of them are kids. We have 317 fully trained aurors and wizards, 84 highly capable DA members, not to mention the advanced DA members who could take on at least five death-eaters each and the other noncombatants who are most willing to aid us should the need arises. The horror-inducing dementors are also on our side... We also have some goblins... giants.... centaurs...house-elves...fairies... supporting our cause. What else do we need? Voldemort's only hold over the wizarding is the frightening memory of the killings, torture, and chaos during his reign of terror but it's all in the past now." Harry paused for a while and noticed the

group relaxing slightly as they listened to his speech. "We can do this... We can win this war... We just have to believe in ourselves. Remember, we have more to lose but even more to gain."

The group applauded him warmly when he concluded his little pep talk.

"So, are we ready for old Voldie now?"

At the Hogsmeade Plaza

The program has begun with a brief background about Voldemort, how he came into power and what he had done before the-boy-who-lived defeated him for the first time.

Then for the next part, the ministry erected a magnified pensive (courtesy of Harry) that depicted what happened to the sorcerer's stone, the basilisk and finally the resurrection of the dark lord during the end of the Triwizard Tournament.

Several people were instantly aghast at what they saw. They knew famous Harry Potter, the-boy-who-lived, but no one actually realized the horrors he must have endured to live up to his name. For a minute, they questioned the righteousness of their belief of pinning all their hopes on a young boy. They had unwittingly stripped him of his youth. Merlin, it was harsh for anyone!

This was followed by a short breather -- a demonstration of a proper wizard duel and a melancholy wizard dance that involved a man and a woman swaying to a haunting tune while riding a broomstick and flying slowly around the stage.

Then the Minister announced the next part of the program - the reenactment of Voldemort's defeat exactly a year ago. Everyone paused to watch. This was the moment that they have all been waiting for. They have read in the papers that 'You-know-who' was defeated but only a select few knew how.

As the reenactment was being performed, the Minister and the others eyed all the entrances with trepidation. The performance was about

to end when people felt a sudden change in the atmosphere. Gone was the excitement and enthrallment in the audience level. It was replaced with dread and panic as someone slowly approached the stage.

It was Lord Voldemort. There was no mistaking the ruby red eyes that was glowing dangerously, the claw-like fingers and the malevolent stance he exuded. He walked towards the stage like royalty. People parted to give way to the newcomer. Some even fainted at the sight of his revolting face that seemed to belong to the devil himself. His claws threatened to squeeze the life out of anyone who dared stand in his way.

Following him were his most trusted cronies, swaying their robes in a dignified fashion and removing their hoods as if to proudly display their face to the hushed crowd. Some of them came from the most prestigious families and their duplicity was evident as they dragged a bound and bloodied teenage boy whose clothes was almost unrecognizable from the cuts and bruises he suffered while in captivity. The red hair was the only thing that gave his identity away.

Hermione fumed at the sight of his boyfriend but her good sense dictated that she should not do anything yet. It would be too dangerous to act on impulse. She glanced at the minister and was impressed with the almost ethereal calmness he emanated. It was almost as if he was not staring at his injured son but it was just an act. Deep inside, she knew the minister would like nothing more than to literally tear the man who dared harm his son into miniscule pieces.

"Fancy seeing you here, Voldemort, or is it Tom?" greeted the minister, devoid of any emotion.

"Don't ever call me that again. Where's the boy?" demanded Voldemort.

Harry stepped on the stage and hastily removed the concealing charm on his face for everyone to see. "I'm here, Tom."

"I know." Lord Voldemort grinned maliciously at him and he did not like it all. Something about Voldemort's arrogant bearing made him a

little wary. It was as if the dark lord knew something he did not.

As if sensing his thoughts, Voldemort leered at him once more, baring his painfully hideous face in his behalf then spoke in a cold voice that was supposed to send shivers down his spine; only what he felt was revulsion instead of fear.

"...neither can live while the other survives..." The dark lord stated. "Do you have any idea that recently, I have been seriously harboring the thought of recruiting you? You would have been a worthy addition to my privileged ranks. Together, we could have reigned the wizarding world and purge it with all the impure races but I've changed my mind. Thanks to your pathetic and worthless friend here. I am now aware that it's not possible."

Harry forced a stoic expression and glanced at the bloodied face of his best friend and instantly felt pity for what he must have undergone. There was no trace of anger in his friend's face, only remorse and exhaustion, and that was enough for him to understand that Ron did not betray him purposely.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I've tried but I'm not just good enough." Ron managed to say, his eyes pleading for forgiveness.

"That's all right, Ron. He would have found out eventually anyway." He tried to placate his friend's guilt.

"I am such a prat..." said Ron and Harry realized he was apologizing for a different reason.

"Yes, you are. But you're still my best friend, Ron."

"T-thanks, mate..."

"How touching!" mocked the dark lord before shifting his gaze back to Harry. "And do you know what else I've learned, Potter?"

"Well, actually no, but I'm sure you'd tell me anyway so better get on with it." replied Harry lazily, yawning for effect, as if the whole thing was too boring for him. The effect he'd been aiming for was soon

visible in his opponent's face. Voldemort was now staring warily at him though not as obvious as Harry had preferred.

"The prophecy only stated that it is possible for you to kill me but still, the probability of it taking place was only fifty percent. Meaning, it could also be the other way around. Tsk...tsk...tsk...what a shame! All those years of preparation ...and all for NOTHING!" Voldemort suddenly laughed and peered intently into Harry's face as if searching for a reaction of some sort but failed. "But I'm not that cruel you know..." Harry merely raised an eyebrow at this, patiently urging him to go on. "I will make you a deal. Let's have some fun first. Choose any game you want and I'll let your friend go if you win."

"And what if I lose?"

"Then I shall have your head."

Harry's mind worked overtime. This was a chance to lessen the amount of blood shed in the final battle. Of course, he could not really trust the dark lord to comply with the rules and agreements but there was no harm in trying.

"Let's raise the stakes higher then...If I win, you and your followers will be at our disposal. If you win, the wizarding world shall be yours..."

Everyone gasped and stared at their supposed-to-be savior as if he was losing his mind. Even Voldemort eyed him apprehensively for a moment.

"Harry! You're being totally idiotic!" yelled Hermione in frustration but Harry ignored her plea.

"Bloody stupid Gryffindors!" Draco murmured under his breath, glaring at Harry for effect but found himself observing the event with growing fascination. Harry's unique approach to the situation intrigued him greatly.

Voldemort sneered with apparent disgust at the traitorous son of his most trusted follower before addressing his perennial enemy. "Your

foolishness astounds me! Don't you realize that you're just making things easier for us?" stated Voldemort evenly. He was still puzzled by Potter's sudden change of tack.

Harry ignored him too. "So, do you agree?"

"Naturally. What's the game then?"

"Toss coin." He declared defiantly, daring Voldemort to refuse to play the muggle game but the dark lord did not say anything except cast a suspicious eye on him, silently weighing his motive for choosing it.

The reaction of the audience was more vocal. Some muggle-borns laughed nervously at the seemingly ridiculous suggestion while pure-blood wizards seemed curious yet highly skeptical at the same time.

"He lost it!"

"What's a 'Toss Coin'?"

"Harry, are you out of your mind?!?"

"He can't be serious!"

Amidst the commotion, Luna instantly sent a telepathic message to reassure Harry. *'I told you...you are really bizarre but I like it...play with his mind. Old Voldie's already growing anxious. Maybe you should try my technique later...see if it works...'*

'What technique? The spaced-out one?' replied Harry through his mind.

'Yeah, if you want to make him really uncomfortable. That one never failed to give people the creeps before.' said Luna in an amused tone.

Harry laughed inwardly. *'I'll keep that in mind.'*

The death-eaters noticed his amusement and were extremely disturbed by it. "Master, are you quite sure this is not a trap?"

They eyed Harry warily. They were no doubt coming up with their own horrendous interpretation of the game - imagining it to be some kind of an exceedingly vicious and violent duel of some sort. After all, wasn't it what they came here for? The blood and gore? The joy of killing, torturing and instilling fear in the hearts of those who oppose their noble vision?

"Silence!" the dark lord hissed angrily. Things were not going exactly as he planned and the thing that he hated most next to Potter was the desperate feeling of not being in control. Unfortunately, he could not back out of Potter's challenge now. "Shall we begin?" he spat as contemptuously as he could muster.

"Certainly. Here is a galleon. Pick the side you want and the one who wins two out three tosses wins the game." declared Harry, his lips curling slightly at the end in mild amusement.

Voldemort spitefully chose the 'Head' part. Harry only smirked at his choice.

"Figures...You always had to be the 'Head' of something, don't you? But unluckily for you, I'll always be here to 'Tail' you." commented Harry as he calmly enlarged the coin for everyone to see. Then he addressed the audience. "Kindly listen everyone. This is a vastly known MUGGLE game and was probably played by our old friend here once or twice when he was not yet busy being the dark lord..."

Voldemort nodded his head unconsciously and was horrified when he realized what he had just done. Several people were astounded as they witnessed the action and realized the full implication of his words. Even the death-eaters flinched at the revelation. They had never truly believed that the boy was telling the truth when he taunted them before of Voldemort's questionable heritage but here was an indisputable evidence and they were quite unnerved by it.

Harry stole a glance at Voldemort's fuming figure and decided not to overstretch his patience this early. "Anyway, the coin has two sides - the Head and the Tail. To be fair, both Voldemort and I are going to toss it then whoever's side appears wins that round." Harry raised his wand. "On the count of three.....1.....2.....3...."

Both Voldemort and Harry used their wands to toss the galleon then waited in anticipation for the outcome. The audience, too, held their breath as they intently observed the steadily declining swirl of the coin until it finally stopped.

Tail

The entire light side cheered and were doing high-fives of their own while death-eaters pointed their wands ominously at them but could not really do anything.

Harry sighed with relief and grinned. "Well, I win. Sorry, Tom." he said though not feeling sorry at all.

Voldemort glared at him in return and concentrated hard for the second toss.

"On the count of three...1....2.....3...."

Again, they both used their wands to toss the galleon, but this time, Harry felt something that he should not have. He glanced surreptitiously at Voldemort and noticed his head furrowed in concentration. He shifted his gaze to the galleon and confirmed with disgust that Voldemort was wandlessly controlling the galleon for it to fall in his favor.

Head

The death-eaters immediately sent dark marks on the sky in their excitement, shocking the wits out of those who were not able to witness the celebration, while the light side booed and tried to shove some dark cloaked figures out of the way to get a better view, momentarily forgetting that those were death-eaters they were jostling aside.

'Damn!' Harry thought. 'This man could not even play decently.'

"Looks like I won, Potter." Voldemort had regained his confidence in winning the second toss and was taking great pleasure in rubbing it in.

"Just as I have expected... you won't honor the rule of the game, Tom. You could never play a fair game if your life depended on it." stated Harry, his face clearly showing his disgust at the man.

"That's what makes me who I am, Potter." sneered the dark lord.

"Fine...If that's what you want, then I'll give it to you -- full blast. Don't say I didn't warn you." Harry said as the air started to sizzle with energy.

"On the count of three...1...."

"Bring it all you've got, Tom. Don't hold back." uttered Harry ominously, his eyes never leaving his opponent's face.

"...2...."

"I won't." declared Voldemort with the same intensity but Harry did not miss the slight waver in his tone.

"...3...."

The galleon was tossed for the last time and everyone waited with bated breath as the coin spun continuously but instead of losing speed, the galleon appeared to twirl faster than before until no one could clearly predict the possible outcome of the final toss...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Hey, thanks to all who reviewed especially those who have been following my stories since the beginning...it would not be long now...The next chapter would be the FINAL TOSS then the EPILOGUE.

Thanks again and keep on reviewing ;-)

Readers'

Challenge!

To my dear readers,

As you can see, this is not a real chapter but a challenge to test your analytical skills and the ability to guess correctly.

Rest assured that the story is already finished and I'm just finalizing everything. I'd probably post the last two chapters before the week is over so for now, let me just give you something to think about over the agonizing wait...

If you remember correctly, the lost prophesy plainly stated that at the final battle, seven loyal allies shall be with Harry but ONE will not survive. Have you any idea who that unlucky ONE is? If so, please state your theory including the reason behind for that conclusion in the REVIEW SECTION so that others could view your theories too. None of your answers would make a difference though since I've already made up my mind and had completed its justification as well. I'm just extremely curious about you think about that matter.

So there!

Hoping someone's mind works as crazily as mine...

Good day!

Darak

P.S. Oh, by the way, the mystery behind Mr. Ollivander's disappearance shall finally be solved and his appearance in the next chapter will prove to be a momentous event. If anyone can guess his role there, then that person is definitely writer material (at least in my opinion, of course, hehhehe) or maybe just plain brilliant.

Chapter 21: The Final Toss

The entire light side watched with great trepidation as Voldemort launched a full attack on the galleon, staging some highly complicated maneuvers to force it to fall in his favor. With a combination of wand and wandless spells hurled at it, the defenseless coin slowly started to bend towards the evil man while its swirling became more frantic. For one horrific second, they had all thought that the dark lord would win. It was only a mere inch from the ground and the wizard saviour seemed unable to do anything but hold out one hand to keep it from falling.

Evidently anticipating his victory, Voldemort gave a triumphant sneer at Harry. "Thank you for making things easier, Potter, and for that, I might even let you live but I can't speak for your friends though. They might even be plotting your grisly murder as I speak. Isn't it depressing that the people you swore to protect will be the ones to erase you from existence? Poor kid... tsk..tsk...tsk...and to think I really enjoyed the times we spent together. Perhaps we can have a proper duel again some time...if you're still alive, that is."

To his surprise, however, Harry seemed unfazed by his taunts.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord had come...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not..."

"What are you talking about, Tom? The game's not over yet." said Harry. "In fact, it's just warming up." With that, he promptly flicked one finger and the coin swung to the other side at a blink of an eye.

Voldemort's agitation as Harry tipped the coin was priceless. The dark lord exerted considerable power to prevent the coin from falling. He barely made it in time and now his expression was just plain lethal. No mirth...No playing games anymore...and Harry realized that, too, for he immediately enclosed the area surrounding him and Voldemort with a shield charm to protect the people from being hit by any stray or rebounded curse.

Once more, the coin was stuck in the middle, whirling in a state of anarchy and the air began to reek of burnt metal as the final toss intensified. They did not know it yet but the countless spells thrown was beginning to take its toll on the coin. The only thing that was preventing it from being destroyed was its continued circular motion holding all spells at bay. Then for some peculiar reason, all the forces applied gravitated towards the core then shot upwards at a speed of light.

Harry looked stunned for a moment, at a loss as to what could possibly be causing this weird occurrence, then his eyes widened in alarm as he realized what Voldemort was intending to do. He tried to block the combined spells from going upwards but between controlling the coin and maintaining a shield charm around them, he realized that he may not have enough strength to accomplish everything at once.

Voldemort was harnessing their combined energy to open a portal -- a portal that would release who-knows-what-kind-of-spirits but knowing him, it would definitely not be saints and querubins. Harry's fears were confirmed as the once peaceful earth began to shake tremendously at the blatant disruption of nature's balance. More and more people were succumbing into the foolish notion that 'apocalypse' had come to end all things. And as if that was not enough, a terrible storm started to brew...with jolts of lightning forming eerie shapes in the sky.

Harry took a few seconds to absorb everything that was happening around him. The rain had poured and the thunder and lightning added a certain sense of foreboding to the current situation. Summoning his remaining strength, Harry pointed his wand at the galleon.

"MAXIMO REDUCTO!!!" He felt the rush of energy course through his wand, blasting the coin into tiny pieces. The effort greatly drained his strength but he hoped it would be enough to halt the invocation.

The grinding sound of exploding metal disrupted everyone's concentration and time seemed to stand still as every single eye followed each particle that was falling on the ground. Harry thought that it had gone well until he felt a stinging sensation on his right hand.

"Look! The boy's wand is on fire!" exclaimed one observer.

Harry promptly dropped the wand as the heat became unbearable and watched in frustration as it was consumed by the flame. Apparently, the rain was not enough to keep it from burning. 'Damn wand! Too weak for my need... I wish I could have my old wand back...' he thought wryly. Wandless magic was great but he was also aware that he would be overcome with fatigue sooner than he preferred. The onlookers stared at each other, wondering who won the game and what would happen now that Harry no longer had a wand but nobody could provide an acceptable answer.

"You-know-who was obviously using some underhanded tricks therefore Harry Potter won by default." said an old wise man, nodding his head slightly in contemplation.

"Idiots! Didn't you see he destroyed that damn coin cause he was losing?" yelled one of Voldemort's slaves, furious that anyone dared to suggest that his master lost.

"Hey, hey! Watch your language, young man! Mister Potter only did that because your master was damaging the ozone layer by directing all the energy upwards." quipped another one. Clearly, no one had correctly guessed what the dark lord was doing yet.

Voldemort, however, was quick to point his finger on his rival. "That's blatant cheating, Potter!" he roared in fury as the energy faded gradually.

"And what do you call that - fair play?" Harry retorted angrily, pointing at the remaining rays of light. He had hoped that he had halted the summoning but he was too late...a small hole has already been created...and he had no wand now.

Voldemort noticed his wand's absence too and the malevolent smirk returned to adorn his charred lips. "It wouldn't be long now, Potter. Just wait..." the dark lord stated with utter malice then, completely ignoring the boy, he raised his hands and began chanting an ancient spell that no one has heard of before. His most loyal servants

apparated later to form a human shield around him.

...ku ya ba ri no ku wes ...

...Ti tee kumen ...

...Ah ha....ah ha ...

...Ti kumen ah ha....

Upon realizing that the game was over, people ran around like madmen, unsure of what to do and where to take refuge. Chaos consumed the entire plaza. Some had the good sense to apparate to safety but others seemed to forget the little thing called 'magic' that all witches and wizards could perform especially in times of dire need.

The death-eaters outside the circle took the commotion as a signal to hex the disoriented people to their hearts' content. Trolls, giants, werewolves and other dark creatures shortly joined in the uproar. Fortunately, the sun has not fallen yet, effectively hindering the arrival of Voldemort's most powerful allies -- the blood-sucking predators and zombies. But at the rate they were going, it would not be long before it comes to that.

Aurors and Order members did not waste any time though. As soon as they noticed the new arrivals, they quickly shot red sparks on the sky to signal that it was time for the reinforcements to arrive. The majestic centaurs were the first ones to answer the 'call', followed by the goblins...and there were giants and spiders too! They were led by a grim-faced Hagrid whom none had seen for a long time but it later became apparent that his hard work with the creatures had paid off.

Soon, a full-pledged battle had erupted at the still crowded plaza. Troll against trolls...giants against giants...centaurs against werewolves...giant spiders against other dark creatures...wizards against wizards...

'This war causes nothing but death and destruction.' Harry thought as he witnessed the battle unfold. 'Our world should not be like this. We could all co-exist and live peacefully.' He was sickened by the

situation thus, strengthening his resolution to end the war that day.

As per agreed battle position, adult wizards tackled the death-eaters attacking innocent and defenseless civilians and the DA members handled those in the immediate vicinity of Harry. On first glance, the arrangement seemed foolish and dangerous but they all agreed that although DA members could handle dark wizards, it would be very difficult for them to cast spells where there were several noncombatants in the line of fire so the Order just assigned the young defenders to watch their backs and assist the portkey makers in their job.

Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Vector (portkey makers) were the ones in charge of the production of pre-arranged portkeys that would transport the innocent bystanders to various safe houses. Unfortunately, its distribution was proving to be a very challenging task for the assigned DA members since death-eaters had a nasty habit of getting in their way. Violent confrontations just could not be avoided even if they wanted to. Once or twice, each of them missed death by a few inches but fortunately ended up with only aching bodies, badly broken bones and severely wounded flesh. Nothing major. No cause for alarm. It was just the usual.

Madam Pomfrey, Madam Pince and other volunteer healers from St. Mungo's were the ones handling the casualties. There was simply no time to go to the Hogwart's hospital wing and they had to conjure an interim clinic behind the stage. They worked overtime healing the wounded and mending broken bones while Professor Severus Snape labored on the mass production of healing, reviving and strengthening potions in his make-shift laboratory beside the clinic. Peter Pettigrew worked as his assistant. Some ministry officials and aurors were sent to protect them from harm. Only heaven knew how many would have been dead if they were not that adept in their chosen field.

As for Harry, he concentrated on the vile creature before him who spearheaded the acts of violence and destruction. Hopefully, the house-elves led by Dobby were faring well in their posts. He wouldn't want Voldemort and his cronies to just disappear when the going gets too rough for them like what happened in the Department of

Mysteries.

He looked up again. The hole was getting wider and if he did not remedy it at once, things could become really ugly for them. 'Damn! He was really invoking the spirits!' He cursed himself mentally as he realized that he did not have any inkling at all on how to counter that ancient spell. He should have paid more attention to the contents of the prophecy.

...yariks ariks ...

...yariks ariks ...

...ti kumen ah-ha...

...ah-ha ku ya ba rin

"ABSOLUTO SCELLER!" Harry wandlessly attempted to close the hole but to his dismay, his absolute sealing charm had no effect whatsoever. It did not even reach the target.

At the corner of his eye, Harry noted that the advanced DA members seized the chance to rescue Ron. There was no hesitation in their movements. Ginny and Neville viciously attacked the death-eaters while Luna and Hermione attempted to heal and revive Ron. Draco, being the natural leader that he was, rapidly assigned DA members to strategic locations while the red-headed boy was being healed. 'Good. At least Ron's in safe hands now.' he thought.

"INCENDIO! IMPEDIMENTA!" Harry furiously flung the curses at the death-eaters within the circle. There was only one thing in his mind. He had to break through Voldemort's barrier.

The death-eaters erected their own protective ward while throwing their own hexes at Harry.

"Stupid boy! Why don't you just give up?" snarled Mcnair as he hurled a complete reductor curse at Harry but the boy only diffused the spell.

"NEVER!" shouted Harry in between defensive and offensive spells. He was already worn out from all his earlier effort but he did not want to back out.

"LATIGO INFLAMORE!!!" a flaming rope emerged from Rookwood's hands and whipped Harry with it.

One lash collided with Harry's back and he almost fell over from the stinging sensation of burning flesh but he did not let it distract him from his main objective. Fuming with rage, he retaliated with an ultimate freezing charm to render the offensive tool unusable.

"You have children too, Rookwood. How would you feel if someone of your own kind hurt your children just because they happened to be on the opposite side?" he queried the man who used to work for the ministry, an agency sworn to protect the people.

"No children of mine shall oppose our noble cause. If they do, I will kill them myself." Rookwood retorted in an icy tone, leaving Harry with no doubt that his loyalty to his master was above any other.

"Merlin! You've really sold your soul to the devil and for what -- a few thousand galleons?" shouted Harry in disbelief.

"For power, Potter....and glory..." It was Lucius who answered this time, eyeing Harry with so much contempt that had it been possible, he would have died immediately from his withering glare.

"Really? As far as I can see, Voldemort was hoarding all the power and as for glory....there's nothing glorifying about what you're doing. In fact, you're just disgracing your name." stated Harry dryly.

"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!"

"CRUCIO!"

"IMMOBILUS!"

"STUPEFY!"

"AVEDA

KEDAVRA!"

The curses from the enraged death-eaters came flying simultaneously. Harry struggled to dodge them all while shooting offensive hexes of his own but his exhaustion was catching up with him. His reflex was slowing down.

"HYDROXY OXYDUS!!!" Three voices yelled at once.

Harry spun around to see who had cast the spell. One was Ron. There was still some trace of the torture but he seemed definitely better. Behind him were Luna and Hermione who were smiling warmly at him.

"Glad you're back, mate. Are you sure you're all right?" said Harry excitedly as he clapped his bestfriend on the back.

"I've been better but there's no way you can make me miss the fun." replied Ron, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hey, need any help?"

One hand tapped Harry's shoulders and a familiar warmth immediately flooded his whole being as he saw Ginny, Neville and Draco standing behind, ready to fight with him. He was very fortunate indeed to have such loyal friends. He smiled and nodded. "I could definitely use your help against those idiots." he said, pointing his fingers on the death-eaters who were still slightly disoriented after the Water Cannon spell.

Voldemort's lackeys were greatly dismayed by the intrusion and conveniently forgot that they were supposed to guard their master. They each tackled one of the advanced DA members who were more than eager to practice what they've trained so hard for.

Harry was grateful to be away from Voldemort's menacing and revolting presence for a while but his momentary respite was over. He tried every powerful spell imaginable to distract the dark lord but nothing seemed to be working. It was apparent that the ancient incantation was protecting him until he could finish the invocation.

Getting desperate, he scanned the crowd once more to look for someone who could possibly give him some relevant answers but all was busy fighting or healing.

He dared to look up once more and was deeply appalled when he witnessed some ghostly figures emerging from the portal and several more were fighting to escape from their confinement. To make things worse, the storm had already escalated into a tropical cyclone and thunder and lightning were multiplying the fear factor for almost a thousand times.

'Potter.' A voice spoke softly in his head.

'...and I'm hearing voices again...great...just great!'

'POTTER.'

'...the voice just wouldn't go away...'

'POTTER!!!!' The voice was more insistent this time.

A lightning suddenly blinded him from everything and he could see nothing but white...pure white..and the voice seemed so it be.. 'God, is that you? Have you gone to take back the bad spirits?' asked Harry tentatively, feeling ridiculous yet curious at the same time.

'What the hell are you rambling about, Potter?' The voice roared in his head, followed by a certain nasty remark about dim-witted saviors blah-blah-blah...

'Professor Snape...?' Harry slowly turned around saw a disheveled Professor Snape who was still carrying several containers of freshly made potions on his hands. The professor must have realized what happened too and decided to help. He was mentally communicating with him and there was no doubt that too much fumes and chemicals were making him a little cranky.

'Good. I thought we've lost you for a minute there.' A huge sigh of relief followed then... 'WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU WAITING FOR? SUMMON THE DE-MEN-TORS NOW!!! THEY'RE THE ONLY ONES

THAT CAN TRAP THE SPIRITS!!!'

No response.

'POTTER?!?' the voice inquired in an exasperated tone yet there was also a slight tinge of concern.

'Ooops, sorry, Professor. Just wanted to make sure that it's not old Voldie toying with my head.'

Snape's only response was a sharp and sarcastic retort. Harry smiled in spite of himself. 'Still the same old git...'

'I heard that, Potter!'

'Just kidding...' Harry summoned the dementors, careful to leave enough numbers to protect the safehouses.

Within minutes, the temperature dropped lower than before and the atmosphere became instantly subdued as several dementors glided towards Harry and waited for instructions. The few remaining noncombatants fainted and DA members rushed over to bring their bodies to safety.

"It's time for you to feed. Capture those malignant spirits!" The dementors bowed slightly and went on their way to hunt the wandering souls.

Soon, the plaza was filled with loud shrieks of protest by the spirits. They had just escaped their prison and were definitely agonized by the prospect of being locked up once more. Voldemort was positively livid when he saw what Harry was doing and more so when he noticed that his minions were being beaten to a pulp but for some reason, he did not seem too concerned.

...The Dark Lord would invoke the spirits but the one would entrap their souls...his servants shall be overcome...

Harry then slumped on the ground in exhaustion and decided to watch how the others were doing. He was ecstatic to find out that

they were winning. All the innocent bystanders had been led to safety. Ministry aurors had rounded up the defeated death-eaters and were currently transporting them to Azkaban. Most of the dark creatures were slaughtered and the few survivors had fled. The dementors were having a field day and most of the spirits had been contained. But he did not allow himself to be complacent. Anything could happen within the next few minutes and the tides could still turn against their favor easily. His heart swelled with pride when he observed that none of his friends needed any help at all except for Draco who seemed to be struggling within himself as he fought with his own father. *'This is going to be very interesting.'* he thought.

"Father, how could you be so blind? The dark lord has given you nothing. You've traded your soul for nothing. Isn't your family more important than that monster?" stated Draco calmly, pleading his father to understand.

"Nonsense! You've spent too much time with the mudbloods and muggle-lovers to fully comprehend the nobility of our cause. The Malfoy's have always been intelligent enough to discern where our loyalties should lie and I thought you're just as clever but no--you had to associate with inferior people. You're a disgrace!" With that, Lucius threw curses at Draco with such ferocity that no one would even think that they were related.

Draco threw spells meant to capture and not to harm his father while Lucius, being the heartless bastard that he was, showed no mercy at all as he hurled powerful dark curses on his only child. In fact, he did not even hesitate to enunciate the dreaded words when his son fell down after being hit with a particularly nasty spell.

"How dare you humiliate me in front of my Master! Aveda.....Kedavra!"

Harry suddenly went numb. He saw Draco's eyes widened with horror and sadness as the little green light sped towards his limp form.

Draco closed his eyes, accepting his terrible fate. He wouldn't escape anyway...he couldn't move. He just couldn't believe that his own flesh and blood could be that ruthless.

Harry saw all this and felt remorse for the boy. He used to feel sorry for himself because his parents were killed when he was still a baby but Draco definitely had it worse and though he used to be an arrogant brat, he did not deserve this treatment from anyone especially from that poor excuse of a man.

...a terrible thunderstorm would arrive at the time when the final battle shall be fought...Seven loyal allies shall be with him...but one will not survive...

"NOOOOOOOO!!!!" With a sudden rush of adrenaline, Harry attempted to deflect the killing curse but it was too strong. Lucius must have felt such powerful hatred towards his son. Without a thought for his own safety, Harry swiftly leapt to push him out of the way. He thought they both made it to safety until he felt something hit him sharply at the back. As he fell on the ground, a weird thought occurred to him...'Is this how death's supposed to feel like?'

He sensed someone rush to his side, embracing him tightly. "Oh, my God! Are you all right, hon?"

'Hon?' Harry opened his eyes tentatively and was stunned at the view before him. Ginny and Neville had their wands pointed at an immobilized Lucius. Draco was weakly attempting to stand up and judging from his glazed expression, he also couldn't believe that he was still alive. But the image of Ron consoling a tearful Hermione was deeply disturbing.

"W-what happened?" he asked worriedly.

Ron did not reply. Instead, he let his head hang low and pointed one quivering finger at a figure lying on the ground.

Harry gradually turned his gaze to where Ron's finger led to, fearing the worst but he had to know. A gloomy silence followed as he stared in shock at the limp and lifeless form of the one who saved his life.

It was Dobby --- Dobby, the house-elf.

It was then that he realized how much he must have meant to Dobby for him to do that. And before he realized it, tears had begun to fall on his cheeks as everything that Dobby had done for him come flashing back in his memories.

"Dobby has come...to warn you...There's a plot...a plot to make terrible things..."

"Err...Dobby, why don't you sit down?"

"Sit down? Sit down? I've never been asked to sit down by a wizard...like an equal..."

"Why are you doing this, Dobby?"

"Dobby has to warn Harry Potter and if my master knew....Dobby had to iron his hands..."

"So you sent those bludgers to help me?!? Be glad that my bones have not grown back or I'd have strangled you to death..."

"Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home...."

"What can Dobby do for you, Mister Harry Potter? Do you want some cookies?"

"No, Dobby. I just dropped by to give your gift."

"Oh, Mister Harry Potter is so kind. Thank you very much!!!" Dobby hugged him and jumped up and down as if seven pairs of socks were the most precious gift in the world.

"Just call me Harry. That's what my friends call me."

"A f-friend? You think of Dobby as a f-friend?"

Dobby had risked his life numerous times to help him. He broke the house-elf code to warn him of the dangers ahead and suffered severe injuries because of it. If it were not for Dobby, he wouldn't have found

out about the Room of Requirement -- where the DA was formed in defiance to Dolores Umbridge's dismal teaching; where they took refuge after the fall of Hogwarts; and most importantly, it was where Harry and Luna had been drawn to each other.

Dobby had always been there for him even if he and his friends just needed something as trivial as midnight snacks or hot chocolate. And what had he given him in return -- socks?

Another sharp wailing brought him back to his senses.

"Mister Potter is the greatest wizard alive. He gave Dobby his freedom. He treated elves as equals...Mister Potter gave our dignity back." The small elf's shoulders trembled as she spoke those heartfelt words. It was Winky and Harry felt more remorseful than ever. Dobby was the one who inspired the elves to believe that they were not inferior beings...and now, he was gone.

"I'm sorry, Winky." was all that Harry could manage to say. He felt that a lump had formed in his throat and he couldn't say anything else. His friends were silent as well.

"It was not your fault, sir. It was the evil man's fault." cried the elf and hugged Harry as if to console him.

"How touching! I never thought you had any real concern for that creature."

The group wheeled around to see who had dared make a mockery of their grief. It was Voldemort. The invocation was completed and he strode to them with so much confidence that it was quite unnerving.

"You're alone now, Tom. You're minions were gone. Why don't just give up while you still got the chance? I really don't want to kill anyone -- even you....especially you. I don't want my hands to be tainted with your poisoned blood." stated Harry, his rage building once more.

"Give up? You must be kidding, Potter. Once I've won, I can always resurrect my followers and recruit some more powerful ones." replied

the dark lord, his amazing display of serenity baffling the group. "I have finished the summoning." he declared triumphantly.

"Well, that's rather obvious." said Harry dryly. "But it's also obvious that the dementors have managed to entrap the souls."

"Oh, that...I forgot to mention that I only need one..."

"W-what do you mean?" asked Ginny anxiously.

"Slytherin's soul had come and transferred his abilities to me." the dark lord replied proudly.

Harry laughed derisively. "You mean you went to all that trouble for that? My goodness! I thought that you, after claiming that you're Slytherin's heir, had already inherited it. But of course you had to do something extra since you're not a pure blood."

The dark lord merely scowled at his remark. "I'm sure you won't find it humorous once I'm through with you."

"Prove it then." challenged Harry, his tone not wavering a bit. The sooner he learned what his enemy's new powers were, the better.

The dark lord's eyes turned blood red with fury at the provocation. He raised his hands and turned everything to ice.

"How about that, Potter?" Voldemort grinned maliciously. Before Harry could say anything, he swept his hands once more and trapped everyone present in a frozen cube. "Or that? They would die there, Potter...no one could withstand that cold but at least, they would stay that way forever." The dark cackled merrily at his achievement.

"You've become an elemental..." whispered Harry in surprise.

"Brilliant deduction! And our link was the only thing that saved you from that fate. But it doesn't matter. Now they would witness your death and would not be able to do anything. We're both alone."

The dark lord rambled more about his achievement, how great and

powerful he had become, and what he would do after...unfortunately, he had lost his solitary audience. Harry had already conjured a huge fireball and was currently thawing the ice to free his friends. Half-way through, Voldemort had noticed the lack of angry retort and terrified shrieks.

"CRUCIO!" he yelled and roared with malicious laughter as he watched Harry collapse on the ground, writhing in pain.

Harry struggled to see how his friends were doing and was puzzled to see them all frantically pointing their fingers upwards. Curiously, he looked up to view what the excitement was all about. The portal was still open --- so what? Then he saw it, or them to be precise. Then he smiled. Help has arrived and just in time...

Spirits of his parents, Dumbledore, Sirius, Cedric and Dobby formed a ghostly shield around him to distract Voldemort while another swiftly entered the circle.

"What are you doing, boy? You'll never make this without your old wand." admonished the spirit of an old man with wide pale eyes that shines like the moon light. Harry wondered how he ever got the creepy feeling when he had bought his wand from him before. The old man had a kind face and a wise, penetrating gaze that reminded him of Dumbledore.

"But my wand was broken..." argued Harry weakly.

"Is it your wand or not?" Harry nodded reluctantly. "Then summon it and let me do the rest."

Harry held out his hand and focused his mind on his wand. It was an unusual combination - holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple. "Accio Wand!" To his amazement, a rustling of wind paved the path for Fawkes as it zoomed towards him. Then the phoenix stopped and flew directly to Mr. Ollivander, dropping Harry's wand to his outstretched hand.

Harry watched in awe as Mr. Ollivander voiced out another ancient incantation. The phoenix flew around the old man and a golden flame

began to encircle both of them. The beloved wand disintegrated but its particles remained suspended in mid-air. Mr Ollivander danced around the raging fire that seemed untouched by the thunderstorm, waving his hands in a smooth-flowing motion. Nothing else mattered as the phoenix feather wrapped around the splinters of wood, joining them together.

Harry stood transfixed as the legendary bird shed a teardrop on his wand's core. The process was complete. Finally, the greatest wandmaker of all time, handed the revived wand to its rightful owner.

"Try it." said the wandmaker.

Harry raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the damp air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the sky. The wandmaker smiled and bowed slightly. He did not bear the dark expression of someone who had lived through the darkest of times. He just seemed contented that his mission had been fulfilled.

"I knew you were destined for great things, Mister Potter. I am deeply honored for having met you, not because you are the boy-who-lived but because you are a truly wonderful person. You have suffered so much yet still maintained your ability to care for others."

"Thank you, sir."

"It's my pleasure. Now, fulfill your destiny and please do be safe, Harry. It's not your time yet. You still have a long and fruitful life ahead of you."

"I take it you're going then?" asked Harry regretfully.

"Unfortunately, yes. We could only stay for a few minutes. We're not meant to be here."

"Did Voldemort kill you, too?"

"Yes, he did when I refused to make him a more powerful wand. But don't vanquish him out of revenge. Do it because it's the right thing to

do." said the wise, old man as his spirit slowly faded.

Harry waved and turned to the ghosts shielding him.

"I wish we'd become friends then, Harry. You're a cool guy." said Cedric and smiled to show that he meant what he said.

"Dobby is all right, Harry. Dobby did something honorable and he's proud of it. Professor Dumbledore said death is just another adventure and he's right. Please tell Winky that Dobby will watch over her and that she must continue what we've started." said Dobby in his usual high-pitched tone.

"We're so proud of you, son. We know you could do it this time." stated Lily and James.

"Everything's going to be fine." stated Sirius in a mysterious tone.

"Don't worry, Harry. Tom may be the heir of Slytherin but you are Gryffindor's heir and you don't need to perform that ridiculous ritual to get it. If my knowledge of our enemy is still accurate, then I'd dare speak that you'll find out soon enough." said Dumbledore in the mysterious tone, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

Harry tearfully nodded and waved as the spirits vanished. "Thank you all. I hope your efforts wouldn't be wasted this time."

As the souls disappeared, the revolting face of his enemy came to view once more.

"So, the reunion is finally over. You think having your wand back would help?" The dark lord spat viciously. "You're still no match for the power of Salazar Slytherin!" With that, Voldemort raised his hand and the storm instantly became more violent. He integrated the lightning and brutally hurled it towards the boy's weak body.

Silence.

Nothing could be heard as the lightning struck Harry's frail form. The impact forced the ground to crack, burying Harry's body inside.

"DIE! POTTER, DIE!" Voldemort hollered and hooted maniacally. The electricity overload would surely reduce the boy to ashes. There would be no body to resurrect...it would definitely be beyond recognition...heck, not even the scar would be visible. He danced around like crazy and hexed around wildly. He frowned at that. It was not as enjoyable as cursing real people. He thought some more. 'What the hell? Potter's dead...might as well have some fun with his friends...'

With that demonic idea, he commanded the wind to make way and a blazing fire erupted from his hands. He flung them on Harry's friends for they were the unlucky ones nearest to his location. His eyes fell on the frozen bodies of Snape and Wormtail as he searched for other people to play with. Another cruel smile crossed his lips. 'Ah, the traitors! I'll deal with them later...'. He waited for the six figures to realize the full impact of the situation. He didn't have to wait long.

"HARRRYYY!!!!"

"Merlin! Did any of you see what happened?"

"No, the storm had blurred my vision..."

"But where's Harry?"

"Perhaps I can enlighten you..."

The six turned around anxiously and were extremely upset to see the dark lord standing coolly there while their friend was nowhere to be found. It was not good but they did not say anything. Instead, they glared at him with unconcealed defiance. "Still stubborn I see." smirked Voldemort. "But your pathetic friend's dead..."

An astounded silence followed. Then Luna bravely stepped forward and arched an eyebrow. "You're lying." she declared with such clarity that everyone was inclined to believe her.

"No? Then look at that burnt crack. Potter's buried there. No one

could live after being struck by multiple lightning."

"No one should live after being struck by the Aveda Kedavra curse either but he did." stated Hermione matter-of-factly, putting on her irritating know-it-all stance.

The dark lord became greatly annoyed at the reminder. "IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU BELIEVE IT OR NOT. THE POINT IS HE'S DEAD. NO ONE'S GOING TO SAVE YOU NOW." he roared hysterically, momentarily losing his control over the situation.

"Then we're just going to save ourselves." declared Neville and courageously sent a stunning spell to the dark lord.

"Yeah, you won't get rid of us that easily!" yelled Draco and cast his own curses to him.

The six teenagers forgot their reservations and begun flinging curses at him at every opportunity. Voldemort's eyes held a maniacal glint as he dodged the curses sent his way and took great pleasure in bringing unrivaled pain to his 'toys'. When he noticed that his playmates couldn't play to his satisfaction, he got tired of the game and summoned the lightning once more.

"Game over." The dark lord muttered wickedly as he brought down the lightning to incinerate their bodies.

The six teenagers tried to roll out of the way but they needn't have bothered. The blow never came.

"Hey, Tom! Did you miss me?"

"W-what? H-how?" Voldemort stammered in surprise.

"My scar absorbed the lightning, idiot. It was quite rejuvenating. I feel like a newly charged battery. You should try it sometime."

The six teenagers watched in amazement as Harry floated on the ground with one hand controlling the direction of lightning.

"How about now?" asked Harry before calmly pushing the lightning to Voldemort's location.

Voldemort's eyes widened in panic and stuck one hand to deflect the visible electric discharge. He had no scar that could absorb and he was not really in the mood to prove if he would be revitalized by it.

"Scared now, Tom. You must have forgotten one tiny detail in your haste to complete the spell - once the portal is open, you could not filter the spirit that would emerge. I am Gryffindor's heir and he had also transferred his elemental abilities to me."

Voldemort grew more desperate as it became increasingly obvious that his advantage over the boy had vanished into thin air. He only had one more trick up his sleeve. He knew Hogwarts do not teach this old combat technique anymore.

"ACCIO SLYTHERIN'S SWORD!!!" he yelled and a silver blade with a serpent emblem elegantly embellished on its hilt came flying out of nowhere. It was also covered with a viscous green substance that emitted a foul odor.

'Poison...' Harry thought in disgust,

Voldemort gripped the weapon tightly and glared menacingly at the boy. Godric Gryffindor was a superb swordsman in his time but that ability could not be transferred. It had to be acquired through rigorous training and years of practice. 'The Potter kid would be helpless this time.' His elation was magnified as he watched Potter's hesitance. What he did not know was that Harry's lack of enthusiasm was for an entirely different reason.

"Accio Gryffindor's Sword!" Harry sighed heavily. He had hoped that blades would not be used in his battle with Voldemort. The prophecy was gradually coming true and he did not like the idea of a pre-determined destiny. It made him feel like a thing and not a person with his own free will. Nevertheless, the situation was there and he had to go through with it however reluctant he may be. He just hoped that after this, there would be no other ridiculous prophecies hanging over his head.

With their swords on one hand and wands at other, the duel began. Voldemort immediately thrust his front leg and stabbed Harry with his sword arm. Harry blocked the blow before the blade could touch his torso but it grazed his arm lightly instead. Voldemort excitedly watched the blood ooze from his body before performing some feints to mislead his opponent into parrying in a different direction. Harry counter-attacked by performing a complicated sword dance that he knew would tremendously annoy his opponent. He had expected Voldemort to tire out easily and just surrender but it seemed that Voldemort did not consider it as an option.

As the duel transpired, both proved to be skilled in the art of swordsmanship. Then their swords met with a loud clang and the sudden impact caused the swords to ricochet in opposite direction.

Harry was the first to recover from the forceful collision. He turned to where the blade had fallen. "ACCIO SWORD!" he shouted and held out his right hand to catch the blade on its ruby hilt. To his astonishment, two swords came rushing to his hand instead of just one.

Voldemort had noticed it too and immediately lunged forward in an attempt to catch the sword before it reached Harry's hand. But he was too late...Harry had dropped his wand and promptly caught the two swords on his hands. The sudden noise caused Harry to turn around in haste, with both blades sticking out...and he didn't have enough time to react. It all happened so fast. He just saw a blur of movement before Voldemort painfully collided with the sharp-edge of a sword. And yes, Harry noted wryly as Voldemort's lifeless body collapsed on the ground, it was the poisoned sword -- Sword of Slytherin.

...he shall perish by his own sword ...and his remains shall reside at the snake's chamber till the end of time..."

Suddenly, Harry felt hot tears sliding down his cheeks. 'Merlin, it's over! It's finally over!' He couldn't believe it. After several years of struggle, innumerable deaths, and mass destruction....the dark days have passed. He had his wish...now he could live in peace...No more

prophecies...no more fighting...just plain, normal life....just like everyone else.

He felt his friends approaching...their steps hesitant...as if they, too couldn't believe their eyes.

"Harry? It's over, isn't it?" It was Draco. And his expression was hopeful, his pale blue eyes betraying all unshed emotions that he had carefully hidden all those year. Why should he? He was free now...No more dark lord to worry about...No more father to impress. Lucius had made it clear that he was no son of his and he was fine with that. 'Good riddance!' he thought happily without even a tinge of regret. Lucius had never really been a father to him anyway.

Harry slightly nodded his head in confirmation. Then a slight laugh escaped his parched throat as a strange realization dawned on him...'How ironic! After all the trouble he went through....Merlin! The gods must be drunk when they pre-determined that destiny." his laughter intensified at the thought. 'The most vicious, most cunning, most evil wizard of all time died in ...an....accident...'

"Are you, okay?" Luna asked tenderly when she noticed the strange emotions passing through his face. "You do realize what happened, don't you?"

"Yeah..." replied Harry. An amazed disbelief still written on his face.

"Well, the prophecy did come true but technically, you're not a murderer, Harry, so don't fret too much about it..." said Hermione to console what she thought was a guilt-stricken best friend.

"Could you believe it? He died in accident...and by his own sword too..." Harry suddenly stopped and glanced at his arm. The stinging sensation on his arm where Slytherin's Sword had grazed before was making him queasy. And he wanted nothing but to succumb to the darkness that was beginning to overcome his senses...

EPILOGUE

July 2009 (12 years later...)

"Everything went hazy for Harry after that. Definitely, Fawkes came to heal his wound and he had locked Voldemort's remains in the Chamber of Secrets. The evil man's corpse will be locked away forever since aside from Harry, there is no other parseltongue alive." said the storyteller to the children in front of him. They were clearly engrossed by the strange tale and that encouraged him to continue. "The bad guys were imprisoned in Azkaban including Peter Pettigrew." The children groaned at that. "Hey, the man still had to pay his debt to society you know but don't worry, he had accepted his fate and was very much willing to comply."

"What happened to the others?" asked a bushy-haired girl with an amazing passion for information as her mother.

"Oh, impatient, are we? Well, Mr. Arthur Weasley was still the Minister and a fair and honest one at that. He was also very active in advocating the rights of other creatures like house-elves, werewolves, centaurs and goblins. Professor McGonagall was still the Headmistress. Professor Snape relinquished his position as the Head of Slytherin House and Potions Master to Draco who turned out to be truly efficient with his job. Professor Snape also assisted the new DADA teacher from time to time -- guess who?"

"Harry Potter?" asked a red-headed boy with pale blue eyes.

The story-teller smiled. "Sorry, wrong answer. Actually, it was Neville. His parents recovered later on since Lucius Malfoy was not there to reinforce their temporary insanity anymore. He also married Susan Bones after he graduated and had a very charming child." The children cheered in response. They had liked Neville too and were glad that everything had turned right for him in the end.

The story-teller continued. "Lavender was a seer unfortunately, she still couldn't control her gift so she tried a different career. She and the Patil twins opened a boutique at Hogsmeade. Fred and George's joke shop prospered and were giving the legendary Zonko's a run for

their money. Lee helped them with the business and later on, the three pranksters married Angelina, Katie and Cho respectively. Colin Creevey became the new History of Magic teacher, would you believe? He made the subject very interesting that no one sleeps through the lessons anymore. Unfortunately, he still hero-worshipped Harry and had the tendency to center all his lectures on him." The story-teller grimaced at that but fortunately, the children did not notice.

"But what happened to the dementors? Did Harry order them to return to Azkaban?" asked a beautiful raven-haired girl. Fortunately, she did not inherit the unkempt appearance of her father's hair as well.

The story-teller visibly shuddered at the suggestion. "Merlin, no! Harry sent them back to their world though he never relinquished his position as the king. He just appointed an officer-in-charge. He believed it was the best thing to do. That way, no emerging dark lord would be able to control them."

The children nodded, satisfied with the explanation.

"What happened to the DA? Did they disband?" asked a timid boy who was a little on the heavy side but his friends never teased him about it. The boy was so kind and gentle that they never wanted to hurt his feelings.

The story-teller smiled once more. "I knew someone would ask that question eventually." He said gently then he paused for a while to wipe his glasses that had become quite misty. "To everyone's surprise, none of the DA members wanted to become aurors but nobody condemned them for that. Somehow the people understood without any need for explanations. And anyway, the dark times had passed so there was no intense demand for that. Hermione married Ron and had a beautiful daughter as smart as her mother and as good at Quidditch as her father. She became the head of the Department of Magical Creatures while Ron became the Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, his favorite team. Draco married Ginny and were gifted with a son who fortunately inherited his mother's good looks ---"

"Hey, what are you talking about, Mooney?" cried the new-arrival in mock protest. He had silvery-blond hair and pale blue eyes. Walking beside him was a beautiful red-head who had stifled a giggle after hearing his words.

"Hi there, Devon. We were just talking about my wife's new book. I just wanted to see if the story was good enough to be published." The dark-haired story-teller grinned mischievously. "And I was just telling them how lucky Draco's son was for inheriting his mother's good looks..."

"Oh, yeah? I think you got it wrong...he got it from his Greek God father. Callah, why are you laughing?" Devon grumbled about some unsupportive wife but he was grinning too.

The story-teller shrugged them off. "Anyway, enough with the distraction. Ginny became the Head of Magical Education and I already told you about what happened to the amazing bouncing ferret so I don't need to repeat that." The children laughed while Devon glared at the story-teller. "Harry and Luna married later and had twins...."

"Like us, dad?" asked the raven-haired girl and a pale-blond haired boy.

"Yes, like you....They left the wizarding world and only their closest friends knew where they were and what their business were but they lived happily ever after." Lander Mooney, the story-teller closed the book and watched the children's reactions. "And that's the end of Lana's final book entitled 'Harry Potter and the Lost Prophecy'. Do you like the story?"

"Yes, we liked it very much, dad!"

"That's a cool story, Uncle Lander. But where's Aunt Lana?"

"Oh, she's preparing your snacks right now. You see she's quite nervous about your reaction so she decided not to be here while I tell you the story."

"Oh, but we liked it, uncle!"

"Then you can tell her yourself later. I'll just go and see if she needs help." Lander stood up and headed for the kitchen. Devon and Ginny followed shortly.

"Do you think it's wise to publish that book, Harry?" asked Draco suddenly, dropping the pretense.

"Why not? It's very educational and lots of children will benefit from it."

"Won't we be discovered?" asked Ginny, voicing out her own concern.

"I won't be risking the exposure of our world since it will only be released in the muggle world and they would all think that it's just a normal fairy tale." Harry replied calmly then smiled when he saw his wife nervously wringing her hands while staring half-heartedly at the sandwiches and juice on the table.

"Did the children like it?" she asked worriedly.

"Like it? No, they did not like it...." His wife's beautiful face fell in disappointment. "They did not like it....but they loved it, hon!" he said and embraced her wife tightly.

Lana's eyes immediately shone with happiness. Then shyly, she removed herself from Harry's arms when she noticed Draco and Ginny smiling knowingly at them. "Oh, hi!" she said then remembered the snacks she promised to the kids. "Why don't you all help me bring the food to the children? They must be hungry by now...after all, it was a very long novel."

POP!
POP!
POP!
POP!

The four adults were surprised at the sudden noise that could only be identified with apparation but they were not bothered by it anymore.

"Came to take your children, I suppose..." commented Harry, pleased to see the new-arrivals but did not like the mode of transportation they had used.

"Oops, sorry, mate. We had planned to use the car but the traffic was so heavy and we couldn't wait to see you again." said a tall and finely-built man with a mass of red-hair. It was Ron.

"Yes, we have something urgent to talk about." said Hermione, still bushy-haired but was not bothered by it.

"Very urgent." Neville agreed, his timidity gone but the gentle manner was still evident.

"Shh...let's us talk about this later..." said Susan Bones-Longbottom as she helped Luna make some more sandwiches.

After everything had settled down, the eight adult witches and wizards carried the food and walked silently to where the children were. They stopped in their tracks when they noticed that the children were discussing something...interesting.

"Your mom's a really great writer. I wonder where she got all her ideas...I mean they're so detailed...the characters and events are so real. She described everything so vividly as if she was there and witnessed it all happen...It's freaky!" commented Draco and Ginny's son.

"Well, she's a little weird. Mom said she used to snap at her for making up stories but they ended up as friends anyway and your mom put her creativity to good use." said the Weasley's daughter.

Hermione eyed Luna sheepishly but Luna waved her off. "It was a long time ago, Hermione, and as your daughter mentioned, we ended up as friends anyway." said Luna with a warm smile.

"Do you think there's a chance that Hogwarts really exists?" asked the Longbottom child.

"No way! It's pure fiction. Mom said so." replied Potter's son and crossed his arms stubbornly as if the matter had already been settled.

"But it would be cool, don't you think?" commented Potter's daughter dreamily. "Just think, we've all just turned eleven and if that's real, then we could all go."

"Yeah, cool! Provided that we'd all go to Gryffindor House, of course. Apparently, it's the best house there."

Behind the door, the Gryffindors nearly choked with laughter at the sight of Draco's horrified expression but they all knew he was just kidding around. They continued to listen.

"You know I really find it weird that our birthdays are so near each other."

"I know what you mean. It's such a strange coincidence. It almost seems that we're all blood brothers and sisters."

"Coincidence, my foot! It's necessity, child! We all thought we're going to die then...." muttered Draco under his breath as he listened to the children's conversation. The others nodded in agreement.

The adults decided to put an end to discussion before it gets out of hand when, out of the blue, four tawny owls soared through the open living room window and dropped several thick parchment on the children's laps. The adults were unprepared to see the purple wax seal on the parchments complete with the familiar elegant 'H' with the miniature images of lion, serpent, badger and eagle embellished around it.

They turned to their children who were gazing at them expectantly instead of being terrified upon learning that they're different. The children had just finished reading their letters and were patiently waiting for an explanation.

"Is this a prank?" one of children asked when the adults failed to say anything. The excitement in his voice betrayed the fact that he wanted the letters to be authentic.

Again, no response. The adults just stared at one another in confusion. They knew this moment would come eventually but they haven't discussed it thoroughly yet.

"This is precisely what we wanted to talk to you about, mate." Ron whispered to Harry's ear.

The children eyed them suspiciously.

"If these letters are what we believe they are, then you've all got a lot of explaining to do." another one ventured courageously after a very long and uncomfortable silence.

Finally, the author of the Harry Potter series relented. "Yes, I think we do." Then she motioned her husband and the others to sit comfortably as what she was about to say would take a very long time to finish. "Now, let me tell you the real story...."

THE END

READERS' RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE

Thanks to all who had responded to my challenge. Here are the most interesting ones.

icequeen240

LUNA

it seems like it must be. after all, happiness can only last so long for harry potter. it just wouldn't do for them both to live, and that proposal scene seemed like the perfect setup for her death- she didn't want to die without knowing she had given harry everything. it only makes sense- unless your brain is far more complex than mine.

GatomonandKariFan

LUNA

OR

RON

Luna because Luna's Harry's fiancée and mostly every fanfiction I've read has Harry's girlfriends dying...

Ron because well, he's tied up, got death eaters all around him and is the most unfortunate person on the light side...Need I say more?.

ettedanreb

LUNA

OR

RON

Why? Well, Luna because she and Harry have a relation and most Filipinos root for tragedy... though, i don't... Ron because he's already in the place to die. He's the sacrificial lamb... the tool that Voldemort uses for blackmailing people in the Ministry and Harry. But i'd really go for Ron.

HPFERAK!

WORMTAIL.

Why? Because he said that he owes his Life to Harry and I believe that he might save him...

DRACO Why? His father hates him and he wants revenge. As seeing this I conclude both of my predictions...

Aaran

St

Vines

WORMTAIL

The whole Harry Potter story line was started by JKR as a children's story. Wormtail doing something valiant and redemptive would true to the theme. Anyone else of the seven dying, with the possible exception of Draco, would be "unfathful." ---- Actually, what I think you are going to do is have Riddle cheat and try to AK (killing curse) Harry while the coin is in the air. Wormtail jumps in the way and takes the blast. Harry AKs Riddle a fraction of a second afterwards. The coin lands tails up and Harry jumps in, with the others, to subdue the Daeth Eaters. ---- So my theory of your intentions goes.

Shavaineth

NEVILLE.

Why?

a) He is the other boy the prophecy could have been about in the first place.

b) of all the characters he's the one who seems to have developed the courage and the cunning I think will be needed to see what needs to be done in time to 'entrap the souls'

c) because it's always the character I least want to die that bites it and I happen to like the way you've characterized Neville's growth through the events in this story.

Gus

HARRY

Why I think so: It's probably the last thing somebody would think of. It probably won't even be thought of. and in an interview, JKR suggested that Harry MIGHT die. Might. Also, I have been reading books in which the most unlikely thing happens. I think that Harry will die. Maybe as a martyr?

AUTHOR'S

RESPONSE

We'll, I must admit I had done something wrong with the challenge because I did not give you the choices but I'm quite surprised that nobody suspected Ginny or Snape of being the unlucky one. After all, they had done something terrible in the past though they both eventually redeemed themselves.

Anyway, why Dobby?

I chose him because his death would be the turning point of the house-elves' situation. It would force them to realize that they have a choice. Their existence is not only limited to being eternal slaves. They could do something worthwhile with their lives if they are just

willing to fight for their rights. Then other creatures would follow because if the 'lowly' house-elves could do it then why couldn't they? Therefore, the creatures associated with the dark side won't be driven to follow any dark lord that would emerge because the ministry and all wizards would be more broad-minded...more accepting.

On a lighter note, I just don't want Harry, Luna, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Draco and Ginny to die. They are still too young and they deserved to live their lives to the fullest after the chaos of war. Snape had endured more than his share of torture and other kind of suffering so I've decided to let him off the hook and be able to enjoy life he dies a natural death.

As for Wormtail, I believe he had partially redeemed himself after risking his life to save Draco, Ginny and bring Harry's 'corpse' to Godric's Hollow. But I don't want his redemption to be that simple. Remember, he had betrayed Harry's parents, put Sirius in Azkaban for twelve years and still had the gall to help resurrect Voldemort after Harry stopped Sirius and Lupin from brutally murdering him. A swift and painless death is actually not a punishment but a reward. I want him to suffer first (I'm so cruel...) then he could go on with his life later --- as a renewed man.

There... I hope I had explained myself well enough to everyone's satisfaction. My mind may not be as complex as others' but I'm sure I possess a crazier one :

As for another sequel, I haven't really decided yet if I want to continue this story but if I receive numerous requests, maybe I will. If ever, the third book would occur twelve years after the second war and would feature the advanced DA members' children though I haven't come up with appropriate names for them yet (any suggestions?)...Of course the usual crowd would still be there but the main antagonist won't be Voldemort. Yes, he's dead and he's not coming back...If Harry's parents and godfather could not be resurrected then why should he be granted that privilege...blah-blah-blah...Anyway, just email me at if you're interested

darak

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Ettedanreb: Thanks so much for reviewing. It was really inspiring to know that a fellow Filipino had read and appreciated my stories. You were also the first to respond to the challenge. Oh. by the way, I had started reading your fanfic (Twisted Destiny) and it was very interesting. I hope you would be able to finish it soon.

wlippinc: Hey, thank you for supporting all my stories. Your reviews have inspired me to finish the story

Prongs Padfoot: I really appreciate your enthusiasm and I hope all your questions have been answered now

mollys cousin: Another great reviewer! Just wanted you to know that your reviews gave me a very warm feeling and kept me going when I was too depressed to write anything.

Xylor Anamay: I really appreciate your support and the advice you gave me about Harry and Luna's tender moment before the fight. I had forgotten about that and to tell you frankly, writing that chapter made me realize that I'm not that good at writing a love story....but at least, I've tried. Hopefully, I would improve with constant practice.

loci: I know you wanted some stories to end with Voldie winning but I'm glad you stuck with this story though it was obviously not the case. I really don't want fiction to have a sad ending cause we already have the real life for that...I mean, in reality, most bad guys already got the upper hand so why extend it to fiction where we have absolute control with the way things would turn out.

Melissa: It's amusing to know that somebody else had hoped that Ginny would turn evil. I must admit I didn't really like her character but somehow, I don't think it would be really fair for the kind-hearted Weasleys to have the only daughter (and youngest too) turn evil so I changed my plot along the way to accommodate her redemption. That's my first excuse and the other...well, let's just say that I have a certain penchant for happy endings :

icequeen240: Hey, thanks for responding to the challenge. You have

given me a very interesting and enlightening insight--an obvious indication that you've put some considerable thought to it. :

Michelle1506: Hehehe I'm glad I shocked you enough to pique your interest

Adara: Hey, thanks for reviewing especially for the last two chapters and thanks for responding to the Reader's Challenge too.

Pink180: Thanks for the reviews and I hope the advice I gave you was useful enough.

secret-snowfall: Thanks for the compliment and I hope the ending was quite to your liking

Nedvedisno1: Thanks for reviewing though I'm not sure if you still had time (or interest) to finish reading. I just want to take this opportunity to tell you that I really liked your stories and I've been following up your third book - Legacies of the Man who triumphed. You did a great job there. For those interested, you may view it at - just search for his author's name.

Semi Ani Yona I'm also not sure if you've also read this story but I'd like you to know that I appreciated your constructive criticisms. If you've noticed, I've written longer chapters now (heheheh)

I also want to thank the following and I hope I had not forgotten to mention anybody:

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amber99

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Cycla

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firebolt

Friend of Frodo

GatomonandKariFan

Gus

hedwige

HPFERAK!

insaneangel

InsomniacBoarder

jaydubya12401

jess

joanna

sapp

karida

kimmerz

Llovegood

Loony Holly

loonygrl90

Lord Ravenclaw

Luna

Luna Lovegood of the Harry Potter Role Play Group

lunapotter2004

Manticora13

Mario

mcmouse-au

Melissa

MelissaMoony

Melted-icicle

merlin99

merlindamage

Motif

Nathalie

OBSESSIVE-BILL-FAN

PadfootPotter

:possom2009

ritaskeet

rogue

kaiya

Sarah

Shavaineth

sinistrasin

Summer

Talhos

Talons

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ZWngDragon